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OCTOBER

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ANOTHER GREAT NOVEL OF THE RIO ROBIN HOOD

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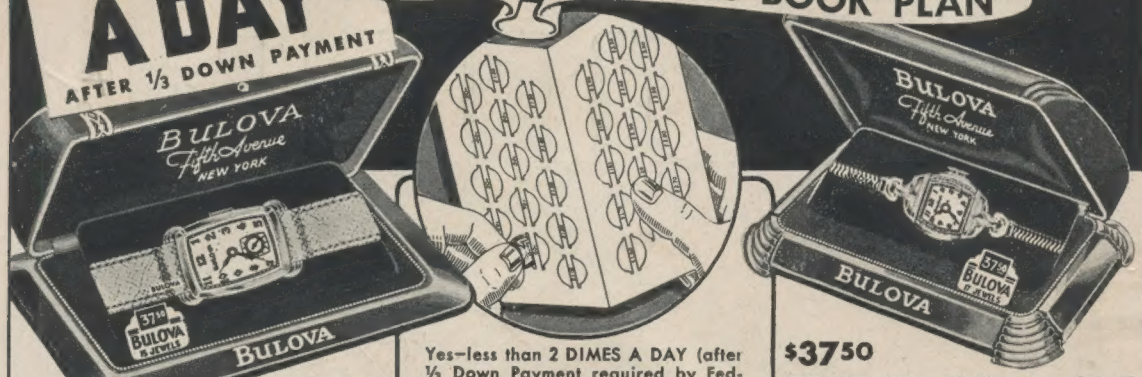

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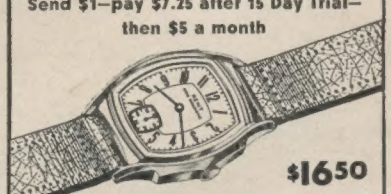

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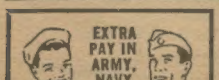

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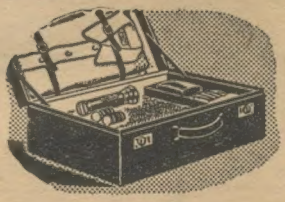
These Wartime Suggestions have been Reviewed and Passed by the Office of Price Administration and the Office of Civilian Defense

1 DON'T USE FLASHLIGHT CONTINUOUSLY. Snap it on when you *need* to see—then snap it off. *Needless* use of flashlight merely wastes "juice."



2 WHEN STARTING A TRIP, don't toss your flashlight *loaded* into your suitcase, haversack or toolbox. Unscrew, or remove batteries—then switch can't "catch" and waste batteries.

3 KEEP FLASHLIGHT OUT OF CHILDREN'S REACH. It is not a toy—but a tool for your convenience and safety. *Know* where it is at all times—so you can put your hand on it quickly when you *need* it.

4 DON'T THROW AWAY A BROKEN FLASHLIGHT until you're sure it can't be fixed. Minor repairs can quickly be made, lens or bulb may be replaced.

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NOVEMBER ISSUE PUBLISHED OCTOBER 2nd!

STAR WESTERN

THE BIG 144-PAGE MAGAZINE

VOLUME TWENTY-EIGHT OCTOBER, 1942 NUMBER ONE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Six Complete Short Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

TOUGHER THAN A BOOT!.....*WALT COBURN* 10
When the blood of bushwhacked trail-bosses dyed the dust of Alamos' street, and only God, the Devil—or perhaps Black Jack Spaden—knew where their herds had vanished, could Moss Reynolds, greenhorn marshal, hope to live long enough to recover them?

SILVER TRENT RIDES ALONE.....*STONE CODY* 42
An outcast from his own rebellious saddlemates, Silver Trent must ride a reckless, lonely trail, that could lead only to a forgotten grave. . . . Or to the living hell of knowing the men for whom he had always fought would brand him traitor!

REBELLION IN HELL!.....*M. HOWARD LANE* 60
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Call on the Deacon for one of his famous preachments, and he'll deliver. . . . Even though—as on that violent day at Bent Hump—he has to punctuate his oratory with powdersmoke to suit the taste of a roaring, kill-crazy congregation!

THE CIRCLE A INVASION.....*FRED GIPSON* 96
Ace White, hardshell rancher-banker, was nobody's fool. . . . Perhaps that's why when he swore to get Dayton Fant's Circle A, he rigged a trap so cruel and deadly that even Fant's best friend called him "Liar," and set out to prove it with a Winchester!

LEN SIRINGO—LIGHTNING MERCHANT.*W. RYERSON JOHNSON* 112
As a harmless lightning-rod drummer, Len Siringo sought to sell protection to Storm Valley ranchers. . . . But in the Thunderbolt Kid and his mob of loot-hungry gunmen, Len found a new kind of lightning—more deadly than any that ever came from the angriest, storm-blackened sky.

★ ★ Star Features ★ ★

THE BRANDING CORRAL.....*Conducted by Strawboss* 6
When is an iron-gray horse not an iron-gray? Why is a paint popular out West and not in the East? Those—and more questions—are discussed by a fellow member of the Fence-Sitters Syndicate.

UP THE TRAIL.....*A Department* 127
Introducing some Commandos of the gunsmoke frontier!

ALL STORIES NEW NO REPRINTS!

Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary; Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter September 6, 1933, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1942, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. U. S. A. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. $1.80. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York City. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd Street, N. Y. C. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although all care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

The Branding Corral

Conducted by Strawboss

Here's the place for everyone in the Fence-Sitters Syndicate to have his say, or ask about the West—both old and new!

THEY say that when two or more horse fanciers get together it's either a love-feast or a pitch battle, and Ed LeRoy, of Boise, Idaho, seems to be making his bid to the Fence-Sitters Syndicate of the *Branding Corral* for either one, or both.

We'll let Mr. LeRoy take it up. . . .

Dear Strawboss:

I've been working around Western horses since long before the fence you have pictured on this page was anything more than inch-high saplings growing on some piney ridge. I've rode and got throwed—by broncs both north and south; owned as fine a personal string of cow-horses as you'll find in any part of the cattle country. And there have been times when I've been glad enough to get a winter's job as barn-man in small-town feed barn, and believe me, I wouldn't be too proud to do that right now, if I had to.

Two of the best horses I've ever had was a three-year-old paint in Wyoming, and Snowshoes, my big sorrel gelding, that wore four white stockings and could read a cow's mind before the critter itself could figure what it was going to do.

Well, mister, I took my first trip East not long ago, and as far as horses are concerned, Kipling called the turn when he said that East is East and West is West and never the two will meet. The folks are fine, though inclined to be sort of loco in some respects, I think, and the country's right pretty if you like it crowded up, but start talking horse with any Easterner, and a man has to ride his temper with a spade bit.

Went to a horse auction, and right away I knew that if I'd head for the stables, I'd find men to suit the cut of my complexion.

I saw as pretty a paint horse there as you'd ever find, and asked what its probable bid would start at.

Can you believe it, the man started

(Continued on page 8)

BILL, YOU SURE HAVE A SWELL BUILD! DID YOU TRAIN FOR A LONG TIME?
ABSOLUTELY NOT! THE ATLAS DYNAMIC TENSION SYSTEM MAKES MUSCLES GROW FAST!

Here's the Kind of MEN I Build!

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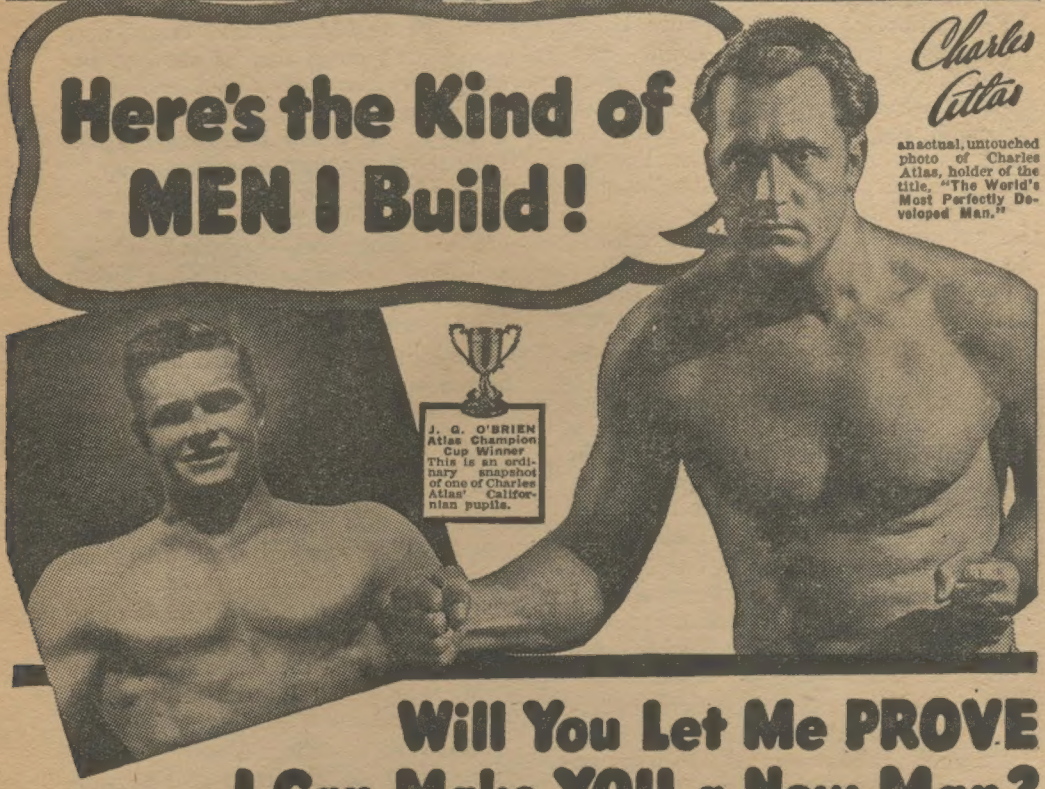
an actual, untouched photo of Charles Atlas, holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."



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My method—*"Dynamic Tension"*—will turn the trick for you. No *theory*—every exercise is *practical.* And, man, *so easy!* Spend only 15 minutes a day in our own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of *"Dynamic Tension"* almost unconsciously ever minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

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(Continued from page 6)

to laugh!"Hell," he says, "we can't give a horse like that away in this part of the country. Full or half-blood Percherons for draft, or plow; Hambeltonian strain for the saddle, fine. But that paint's got too long coupling, and likely stringy muscles. Legs is too straight, too," he says. "Likely the result of uncongenial mixture. Try an' enter him in a fair, an' you'd be laughed off the lot."

"What do you use horses here for?" I ask. "To get their pictures painted? Out where I come from we use 'em for riding. An' a horse has to have as much if not more brains than the man who rides him, as a rule."

Another of these loco gents puts in his two-bits worth, saying that every black horse he ever bought or got in a trade always died on him. Even though they seemed fine for their first owners, and when he got them.

This feller had a cast in one eye and the beginning of a hare lip, and so I told him that I never trusted a man with a cast eye or a hare lip. Which made about as much sense as he did.

Later on I saw a three-quarters steeldust that the folks called an iron gray, and another feller argued that it was a blue roan if he ever saw one. But there's only one right name for that kind of horse as you know, and that's steeldust, and a finer horse for cow-country work was never foaled.

I won't lay all the fault on the jug that was going around, even if it was loaded with stuff they called hard cider, which tastes like something we might feed hogs back home. For the first quart or so, that is. After that, it's sorta mildly warming, and after that, you got to treat it like you treat the cocked hind legs of a balky mule. Only, I didn't know that. Not then.

They led out a strawberry roan with four white stockings, and right away I think of Snowshoes, and how he used to raise hell around camp, moochin' biscuits, and likely pawing over the dutch oven when he couldn't find any. I felt as if I knew that horse.

A crowd of men was around it, and one of 'em says, "There's ol' Jonah, again. The livin' example of the sayin', 'One white leg buy it, two white legs try it, three white legs sell it, four white legs shoot it!' "

Mister, how did I know those crazy fools didn't mean that as she lay, because everything they said seemed to make about as much sense as a woman trying to buy a new hat. There I was with the cider sort of working up in me, and I get the idea that the stockinged strawberry roan was really that old fool Snowshoes—here on a strange and hostile range, alone with a bunch of crazy galoots that wanted to shoot it just because of its stockings.

I took a flying jump that landed me astraddle of the roan's bare back. That roan just turned its head around and looked at me, and if I ever saw a horse smile—not laugh, mind you—that did.

"If you think you're going to shoot old Snowshoes, you better try shootin' me first!" I shouted, and then that roan and I started from there.

They told me later that I made quite a ride. I remember slipping a little when we cleared the fence and hit the road, then lit out for the farm where my wife and I was visiting.

Well, sir, it seems that they weren't going to shoot that roan at all. And before I got done paying my fine for disrupting the peace and busting up the horse auction, old Snowshoes Junior cost me a considerable sum of folding money. And my wife did too, because I took Junior back home in a cattle car, so I never did get to show my wife New York. That was all right with me.

Me, I think I'll stay right here in Boise in the winter, and sneak away whenever I can to the little spread I own. Where there are plenty of paint horses and no bigod "blue roans" or "iron gray's" but honest steeldusts. And where Junior, with his four white stockings, can have the run of the place and hunt for the biscuits I hide under my pillow in the bunkhouse.

Thank you, Mr. LeRoy! And you can bet that we'd have followed your lead!

So, until next issue, *salud y pesetas!*

—STRAWBOSS

To those who think LEARNING MUSIC is hard . . .

MY COUNTRY 'TIS OF THEE,
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Strike these notes and you're playing "America". TRY IT—IT'S FUN

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If you're tired of just looking on at parties — if you've envied those who could entertain others — if learning music has always been a never-to-come-true dream —let this time-tested home-study method come to your rescue.

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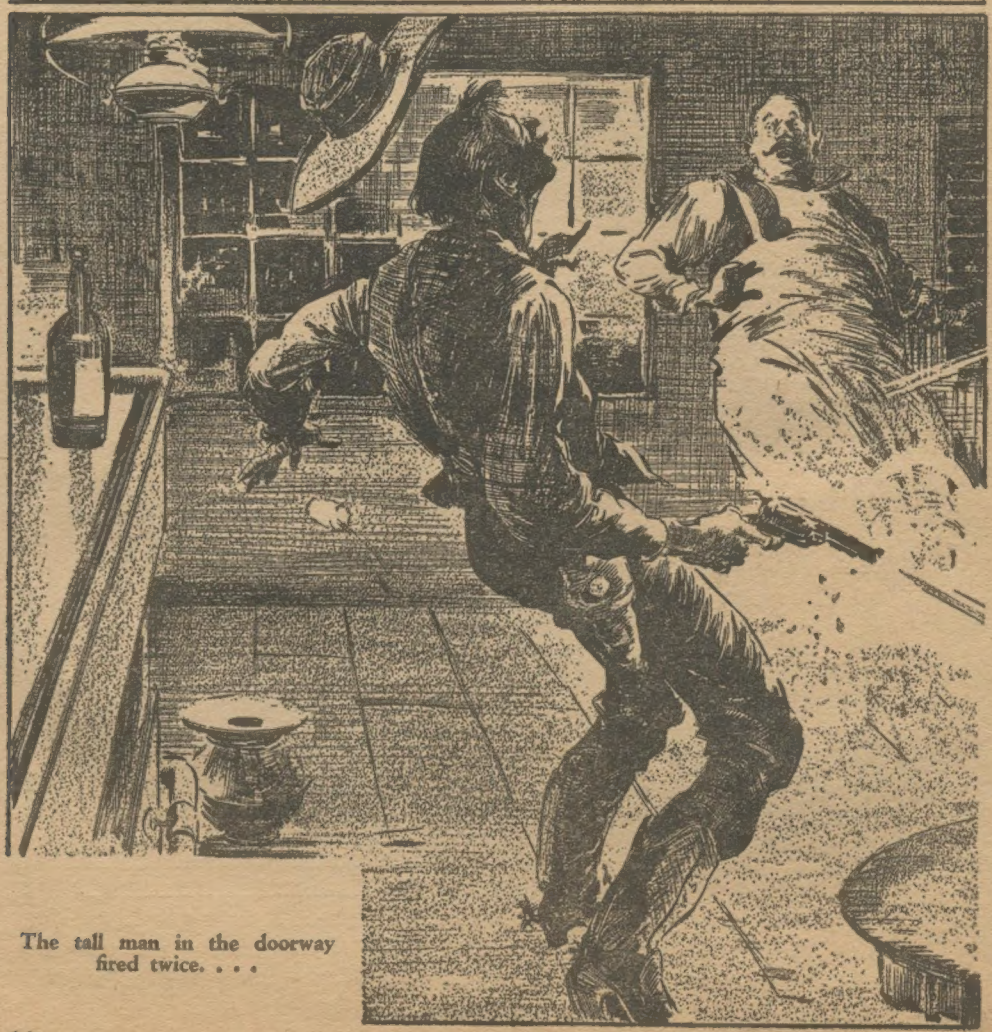

The tall man in the doorway fired twice. . . .

—that was what the raw, roaring Arizona cattle country called the little town of Alamos. For the bushwhacked bodies of honest trail-drivers salted its dusty street with their blood. . . . And no one, not even its newly appointed Texan marshal, could discover the fate of the herds those men had driven!

CHAPTER ONE

Guns in the Dark

THERE was a trail outfit camped across the river from the little cow-town of Alamos, Arizona, and every cowpuncher in the outfit, excepting the night hawk and the men on guard were celebrating. There were saddled horses at the hitchracks and the bar at the Lone Star was crowded. Town Marshal Van Carter had gun-whipped three men since sundown and it was not yet midnight.

Black Jack Spaden, banking a stud game, bet the bartender that tough Van Carter would kill a man or get killed before the night was over. Jack Spaden lost no part of any sort of friendship for the swaggering, bullying town marshal.

It was a little past midnight when the gambler won his bet.

The swinging half-doors parted and a tall, wide shouldered, lean flanked man stepped inside the Lone Star and stopped there.

Marshal Van Carter had his back to the bar and a glass of whiskey in his left hand. Without letting go his drink he jerked his gun. The tall man in the doorway fired twice.

Van Carter's gun sent a bullet plowing into the pine board floor near the tall cowboy's feet. As the stranger's first .45 slug hit him in the belly, the second shot struck the law badge that was pinned to his shirt. The tough peace officer's knees buckled. He coughed once, then crumpled in a heap and lay there.

"If that snake has ary friends in the house," called the tall stranger with the smoking six-shooter, "let 'im—"

The sentence was never finished.

There were two swinging kerosene lamps in the Lone Star, and both of them were shot out at almost the same instant. Black Jack Spaden raked in poker chips and money, while the bartender ducked behind the bar and lay flat on his belly.

Guns ripped the darkness with short spurts of flame. Chairs and tables were knocked over in a wild stampede for the front and back doors. A man groaned, and the groan ended in a death rattle.

Black Jack Spaden's flat toned voice cut through: "All over but the swamping up, Mac. Light a lamp."

The bartender fumbled around until he found a spare lamp and matches. He lit the lamp and set it on the bar.

Besides the town marshal, two other men lay dead. And Spaden was bending over the motionless form of the tall stranger who had killed Van Carter.

"A bullet parted his red hair, Mac. He's out like a light, but he won't die. We'll get him across the street to the hotel. Judge Barbee will want him kept on ice."

"You know 'im, Black Jack?"

"No," the gambler shook his head, "but somebody in the house did.

Black Jack Spaden, a slim, hawk-beaked man with a pair of cold yellow eyes, was known around Alamos as a square gambler. He owned the Lone Star Saloon. He carried a white handled six-shooter in a shoulder holster.

His black broadcloth suit was always brushed and pressed; his white shirt never soiled. The ends of his drooping black mustache hid the corners of his tight-lipped mouth. He seldom smiled and never laughed.

As he stood up he ejected two empty shells from his ivory handled six-shooter, shoved fresh cartridges into his gun and slid it back into its shoulder holster. His black coat dropped back into place over the gun.

Two of Spaden's men carried the stranger across the street to Judge Barbee's Alamos Hotel, where the tall, silvery-haired frontier jurist held court in the dining room. The Judge's large nose was as purple as a cherry, but his quart of whiskey a day did not blear the sharpness of his gray eyes nor dull his wits.

He scowled from under bushy brows at Spaden and the two gamblers carrying the wounded man.

"Look here, Spaden," Judge Barbee's Southern voice that was as deep and mellow as a bell. "Keep your dead carcasses where they belong."

"The man's no more than creased, Judge. He just killed Van Carter. Just in case he should die, however, he deserves to cash in his chips on the right side of the street. But if Doc Steel gets here in time, the man will live. Dead or alive, he's your prisoner."

"He kill Van Carter?"

"Without so much as a 'by your leave.' And a neat job it was."

Black Jack Spaden smiled thinly and went back across the street.

★

THE cowpunchers from the trail outfit, herded by their trail boss whose name was Buck Jimson, were lined up at the bar.

The bartender Mac had set out glasses and the bar bottle and told the crowd that the drinks were on the house. Then he

and the swamper carried Van Carter's body into a back card room.

The trail boss Buck Jimson, a lanky rawboned Texan, his coarse black hair denoting a strain of Indian blood, was cussing the two dead cowpunchers on the floor for leaving him short handed thataway.

"Though neither of 'em," he told Spaden, "was what you'd call a top hand. They bin bullin' an' a-sullin' all along the trail. They taken this chance to shoot out their defugalties."

Black Jack Spaden gave the lanky trail boss a hard, sharp look, then went back to his poker table. Buck Jimson told his cowpunchers to carry the two dead men into the back room, while the swamper got a bucket of water and an old mop.

In a few minutes Black Jack Spaden's stud game was running again. The bartender, Mac, a paunchy man with a whiskey voice and a pair of pale gooseberry eyes, was behind the bar. Buck Jimson and his outfit continued their drinking.

They would, Buck Jimson told Black Jack Spaden, bury their two dead men before sunrise and drift their trail herd yonderly.

The gambler told the lanky trail-boss that Judge Barbee would attend to the burial. Spaden stood in the doorway of the saloon riffling a deck of cards as he watched Buck Jimson and his cowpuncher crew ride off down the moonlit street and into the tall poplars that lined the bank of the Alamos river.

Doc Steel had sewed the bullet rip in the stranger's scalp, but the man who had killed the town marshal of Alamos was still unconscious.

Gray-haired Doc Steel, with his deft hands, was the only citizen of Alamos who did not pack a gun. And he was the only man always welcome on both sides of the dusty street that split the trail town into two bitter factions.

When Doc Steel had the wounded man undressed and put to bed in a hotel room, under a guard furnished by Judge Barbee, he went across the street for a nightcap.

"The man will live, Spaden," he answered the question in the gambler's hard yellow eyes. "Live to hang, if the Judge has his way."

Black Jack Spaden tossed the bullet marked badge on the bar. His thin-lipped mouth twisted in a grin. "Van Carter don't need it where he's gone, Doc. Alamos needs a new town marshal. I'd nominate the tall red-headed stranger who rid Alamos of the man he so aptly described as a snake."

Doc Steel's brown eyes held a worried look. He twirled his tall glass of watered whiskey and shook his head.

His was the position of a man who occupied the thankless job of arbitrator and peace maker. There was no use, he knew, in trying to argue with Judge Barbee, who had a violent temper when roused. Or with Black Jack Spaden, who hid his emotions behind that thin-lipped smile and the coldest pair of eyes Doc had ever looked into.

Doc Steel sipped his drink and waited for the gambler to say something.

But Spaden's gambling instinct prompted him to wait for the other man to do the betting.

"If that red-headed stranger killed Van Carter," said Doc Steel, "then who parted the stranger's hair with a bullet, Spaden?"

The gambler shrugged his tailored shoulders and sipped a tall drink that was mostly water.

"The lights went out about that time, Doc. Why is it that when the lights go out men will make a break for the open, like so many stampeding cattle. Mac and I were alone with the dead when Mac lit the spare lamps. Van Carter dead. The stranger was alive because it wasn't his time to cash in his chips. And there

were the two dead cowhands that Buck Jimson claims shot out an old grudge. Buck Jimson said his tough cowhands came back in later."

"Buck Jimson's brought other trail herds through here," said Doc Steel. He's a quarter-breed Injun. And like some 'breeds he's got the worst of both bloods in his system."

"Whenever Buck Jimson honors our little cow-town with a visit," said the gambler, "there's a killing or two. I had it doped out that he and Van Carter would lock horns tonight. I'd have given Mac odds on it. But the red-headed stranger was a dark horse. Buck Jimson and Van Carter were once pardners in the cow business in West Texas. Hatred and larceny was in their hearts when they split the partnership. When thieves fall out, Doc. . . ."

"You think the red-headed stranger might fit into that old partnership somewhere, Spaden?"

"*Quien sabe?* Who can say? Buck Jimson promised to bury his dead before sunrise when he moves his trail herd off the bedground. But if the stranger is on his legs and not in jail by morning I'll make you a little bet, Doc. I'll gamble that Jimson's herd drifts on without burying his two dead cowpunchers."

"I'm not a betting man, Spaden."

He put down his empty glass and faced the gambler squarely. There was a harassed look in his brown eyes.

"Alamos could be a decent place to live in, Spaden, if you and Judge Barbee would bury the hatchet and smoke the pipe of peace. As it is, the Judge imports men like Van Carter for town marshal. And you back the play of this red-headed stranger, who walks in and shoots the town marshal without explanation. If you have the supreme gall now to try to pin that law badge on Van Carter's killer, there'll be hell to pay. I don't like it."

"Is the Judge claiming," smiled the gambler, "that I hired the stranger to kill his spur-jingling marshal?"

"I didn't probe for the Judge's opinion," said Doc Steel. "I know he has the wounded man under arrest and has two men guarding him. Van Carter was, after all, the Law here."

"Van Carter," said the gambler, "was brought to Alamos from Texas. He was sworn into office by Judge Barbee. His sworn duty was to maintain law and order. Instead, he abused and violated his oath of office by gun-whipping men who were too drunk to give him a fight. If Van Carter had owned any guts he'd have killed me. I didn't need to hire any man to kill him. I do my own gun-work.

"The man who killed Van Carter is a rank stranger to me. But I'm pinning this bullet-scarred town marshal star on his shirt or busting a gut trying. Providing, of course, the man wants the job.

Doc Steel shook his head and picked up his black bag from the bar. He looked tired and a little old as he walked out.

Black Jack Spaden's black brows pulled into a faint scowl above his hard yellow eyes.

"His name is Moss Reynolds," wheezed the whiskey-voiced Mac.

"Uh? Who, Mac?"

"The red-headed young cowhand that wiped out Van Carter. He was a button about sixteen last time I seen him. I was round-up cook for the Reynolds Rail R outfit when Moss wrangled horses for his daddy. He's all man now. I like the way he gets his chores done. No cussin', no argument. Just clean work."

CHAPTER TWO

A New Marshal for Alamos

MOSS REYNOLDS came alive five days later. His head felt like it had been split open with a dull axe, stuffed with red-hot coals, then

stitched together with barbed wire, also red-hot.

He was tied to the bed. Two husky looking men with six-shooters and sawed-off shotguns were playing seven-up and drinking whiskey at a little table near the door. They weren't paying him any attention and he studied them for several minutes before he spoke.

"Hands up!" His voice was a harsh croak.

Playing cards and the half empty bottle went flying as the two guards quit their chairs, upsetting the table. One of them shoved his hands in the air. The other grabbed at one of the shotguns leaning against the wall and dove in behind the open door with it.

Moss Reynolds grinned faintly. The two guards looked at their wounded prisoner tied to the bed, then stared at one another.

"Now if you brave hombres will tell me what in hell's the big notion of keepin' me penned up like a . . . ."

The commotion brought Doc Steel from his own room down the hall. Judge Barbee was coming up the stairs from the small lobby that opened onto his hotel bar.

"Take it easy," said Doc Steel, "You've had a touch of fever. This is the fifth day. I'm the doctor—Doc Steel."

"Who hogtied me, Doc?"

"You were delirious. Two hundred pounds of tough bone and muscle is hard to handle."

"They needed all those guns?" Moss Reynolds' aching head was adding nothing to his pleasant frame of mind.

Doc Steel smiled faintly. "You're under arrest, you know, for killing the town marshal."

"Van Carter? Alamos owes me a leather medal. Got anything for a headache in that bag, Doc?"

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2. APPLY LATHER OR BRUSHLESS SHAVING CREAM WHILE FACE IS WET. IF LATHER IS USED, WORK IT IN WELL WITH BRUSH OR FINGERS

3. TWO EDGES DOUBLE BLADE LIFE. MARKS INDICATED ABOVE IDENTIFY EDGES, ENABLING YOU TO GIVE BOTH EQUAL USE AND GET EXTRA SHAVES

4. CLEAN BLADE IN RAZOR BY LOOSENING HANDLE, THEN RINSING IN HOT WATER AND SHAKING OUT BEFORE IT CAN BE REASSEMBLED FOR SINGLE

Doc Steel nodded and opened his little black leather bag. He gave the wounded man a couple of pills and a glass of water.

Judge Barbee scowled at the two guards and motioned them out into the hallway. He stood there at the foot of the bed, straight as a ramrod, tugging at his white goatee.

Moss Reynolds' bloodshot green eyes stared hard at the Judge. Judge Barbee frowned back at him from under heavy bushy gray brows.

"Untie me, Doc," said Moss Reynolds quietly. "I'm not goin' to rabbit on you. If it's a crime to kill a rattlesnake at Alamos, I'll stand trial."

Doc Steel nodded and started untying the ropes that bound him hand and foot to the heavy bed. Judge Barbee started to protest but Doc silenced him with a shake of his head. The Judge motioned the two guards back into the room. They looked uneasy under Moss Reynolds' mocking, contemptuous grin.

"Take it easy," Doc warned his patient. "You've had a narrow squeak."

Moss Reynolds sat up, flexing his arms and hands to restore the circulation. Then he felt the bandage that was fastened around his head like a turban.

A man down in the bar had crossed the street, taking the news over to the Lone Star that the prisoner had come alive.

When Black Jack Spaden came up the stairs and down the hallway, the two guards halted him at the doorway.

"Call off your watchdogs, Judge," said the gambler flatly. "I'm the prisoner's lawyer."

Judge Barbee snorted. "Lawyer! Keep on your own side of the street, Spaden, where you belong. When Doc Steel says this man is in shape to face the music, he'll stand a fair trial. He'll need the assistance of no tinhorn gambler—"

Moss Reynolds grinned. There was no mirth in it. His eyes were as hard as green glass as he looked from Judge Barbee to Black Jack Spaden.

"Barbee and Spaden," he said softly as if talking to himself. "The Alamos Cattle Company." There was hatred and contempt in his voice.

"Take it easy," said Doc Steel. "You're in no shape—"

"I'm in shape to stand trial at this Alamos kangaroo court. Let's have my clothes, Doc."

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood up slowly. He was a little dizzy but the pain in his head was slacking off.

Clad in a white knee-length nightshirt he stood on widespread legs and grinned derisively at the two burly guards who had their guns pointed at his belly. The red-headed cowpuncher stood six feet three in his bare feet and he was powerfully built.

"Boo!" he barked at the two guards. Then walked over to the wall where his clothes were hanging.

His strength was coming back but he was still weak. It took him quite a while to get dressed. That bout with fever and lack of food had left him weak. His tanned face with its bristle of red whiskers was grayish and beaded with cold sweat by the time he had both tight fitting boots pulled on. Ignoring the others, who had stood there watching him dress, he spoke to Doc Steel.

"I could use a big slug of good whiskey, Doc. Then a thick steak. Those two brave hombres will feel better if I'm handcuffed, mebby. After I eat I'll take my own part in this kangaroo court that passes for justice in Alamos. Barbee and Spaden's own private brand of Law an' Order! Did you know, Doc, that Van Carter, their late town marshal left the Pecos country ten jumps ahead of the Texas Rangers? Not that it matters, because Alamos ain't fussy about who wears its badge."

Moss Reynolds stood on his feet and held his hands out.

"Where's your handcuffs?" he asked bluntly.

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ONE of the guards approached him warily. The big red-headed cowpuncher grinned, showing his teeth. The handcuffs were snapped on his wrists that were swollen and rope-burned. He told Doc to fetch his hat.

"Shoot him," rumbled Judge Barbee, "if he tries to make a break."

"If either of you plug-uglies pulls a trigger," said Black Jack Spaden, I'll plant you alongside Van Carter in the Alamos boothill."

"What you doin', Spaden?" asked Moss Reynolds, "Playin' both ends against the middle?"

"You might call it that," Spaden's thin lips twisted in a smile. "Judge Barbee wants to hang you. I want to pin the town marshal badge on your shirt."

"You'll be tellin' me next," said Moss Reynolds, "that you and Barbee ain't the Alamos Cattle Company."

"We're still pardners in the cattle business," said the gambler. "But there are times when we don't see eye to eye. Don't take my word for it. Doc Steel just saved your life. He'll tell you the truth. But you'd better get that whiskey and beefsteak first."

They went downstairs and into the small dining room. Spaden brought over a quart of first grade whiskey from the Lone Star.

"Compliments," he said, "of Jock MacDougal. Mac says he cooked for the Rail R when you wrangled horses. He tends bar for me across the street at the Lone Star. Drink hearty."

"Sourdough Mac." Moss Reynolds poured whiskey into a water tumbler and lifted the drink in his manacled hands.

The whiskey and a big meal and tobacco fixed him up. He told them to open their kangaroo court.

Judge Barbee had the tables and chairs pushed back against the wall. He sat alone at a table facing the handcuffed prisoner, Doc Steel right behind Moss Reynolds. Both sides of the street were fully represented in the crowded dining room.

Judge Barbee slid a six-shooter from beneath the tails of a rusty black frock coat and rapped the edge of the table with its long barrel.

"Court will come to order!"

There was no doubting the grim fact that Moss Reynolds was on trial for his life. Kangaroo court or not, it was the law at Alamos.

The star witnesses for the defense were Jack Spaden and Mac. Both swore under oath that the prisoner had come into the Lone Star without a gun in his hand. That Van Carter had, without a word of warning, drawn his gun and fired the first shot. That the prisoner, Moss Reynolds, had fought in defense of his life.

Then other witnesses, including the storekeeper from what Spaden called the right side of the street, confirmed the testimony of the gambler and bartender.

Three more witnesses were sworn in and took the stand eagerly. They told how Van Carter had, earlier that same evening, beat them around with his gun barrel without just cause.

The jury reached a verdict without quitting their chairs. They agreed that the prisoner, Moss Reynolds, had shot and killed Van Carter in self defense.

"Van Carter," Doc Steel leaned forward and touched the prisoner's shoulder, "was not a popular man."

Moss Reynolds grinned faintly when the handcuffs were removed and Black Jack Spaden handed him his cartridge belt and holstered gun.

Then the gambler made a short speech. He pointed out that the town of Alamos

was now left without a town marshal. That Moss Reynolds had proved his ability to handle himself in a dangerous spot. He said that Alamos need look no farther for a new town marshal. And put it to a vote.

The vote was unanimous. To the surprise of Black Jack Spaden, Judge Barbee agreed.

The Judge made a short speech. Despite its flowery words, its meaning was meaty. Alamos was known as a tough town—tough as a boot. Law and order were needed here. It was regrettable that Moss Reynolds should have been subjected to the humiliation of a trial for murder. But now he, Judge Barbee, felt certain that the erstwhile prisoner would surely be willing to retract his opinion of the court that he had so bitterly termed a "kangaroo court."

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MOSS REYNOLDS got slowly to his feet. He thanked the jury for their verdict; thanked the citizens of Alamos for so honoring him with their vote. He would be glad, he told them, to wear the badge of town marshal. He would take his oath of office. He would not in any way violate that oath of office.

Spaden handed the bullet-scarred star to Judge Barbee with a thin smile, and the Judge pinned the badge on Moss Reynolds' flannel shirt.

Then the whole town crossed the street to the Lone Star Saloon to drink the health of Town Marshal Moss Reynolds.

Doc Steel was smiling happily and his kindly brown eyes were bright. He walked alongside Judge Barbee as they crossed the street.

"It's mighty big of you, Judge," he said, "to put aside old quarrels and bury the war hatchet."

"Bury, hell!" snorted Judge Barbee. "I've just begun to fight, suh!"

As Black Jack Spaden said that the drinks were on the house, he was remembering—even as Judge Barbee now recalled—that the whole town had lined up at the same bar not many months ago, to drink the health of the newly appointed Town Marshal Van Carter.

"The king is dead," Black Jack Spaden said flatly, lifting his glass of watered whiskey. "Long live the king!"

Nobody but Judge Barbee and Doc Steel quite knew what the gambler meant. The worried look was back in Doc's brown eyes.

Moss Reynolds stood a little apart from the crowd. He thought he knew what the gambler meant. He took it as a challenge. This law badge was the price he was paying for escaping the hangman's rope. It was a tough, dangerous job. He doubted if there was a single man in Alamos who would have it. Alamos, the trail town that was tougher than a boot.

Moss Reynolds set down his empty glass. He straightened the bullet-scarred badge on his shirt and grinned faintly.

"The night I killed Van Carter," he said, "the night that some friend of Van Carter tried to kill me, there was a trail herd camped across the river. A feller named Buck Jimson the trail boss. The cattle was in Buck Jimson's private J road iron."

An uneasy silence followed Moss Reynolds' words. He hitched up his cartridge belt and looked at Judge Barbee and Black Jack Spaden.

"Did the Alamos Cattle Company buy them cattle?" he asked bluntly.

Judge Barbee's nose seemed to darken to a deeper purple. He tugged at his white goatee and cut a sharp look at Black Jack Spaden. The gambler smiled thinly.

"Why?" asked Spaden flatly.

"The Law is askin' the question," said Moss Reynolds.

"And in case the Alamos Cattle Company did buy those cattle?"

"They might book a losin'. Unless that trail herd is scattered to hell and gone, I'm makin' a Winchester cut on it for stolen cattle."

Spaden smiled faintly at Judge Barbee. Then his cold yellow gaze looked into the hard green eyes of the new town marshal.

"That bullet that nicked your skull," he said in his toneless voice, "laid you up a few days too long. Those cattle were sold and put in the Alamos Cattle Company's Rafter A iron. Scattered now, as you say, to hell and gone. Buck Jimson has gone back to Texas to pick up another trail herd. Better luck next time, Marshal."

Judge Barbee let out his breath in a big sigh and gulped his drink of straight whiskey.

Paunchy Mac behind the bar wheezed and shoved the bar bottle at the new town marshal.

"You ain't in no shape to do any hard ridin', Moss. Have a drink."

"I'm workin' on crick water, Mac. No more tanglefoot."

Moss Reynolds, the new Town Marshal of Alamos, turned and walked out of the Lone Star and down the street to the feed barn where he had stabled his horse nearly a week ago. He was grinning faintly but his eyes were hard and cold and dangerous.

CHAPTER THREE

A Chore for a Badge-Toter

MOSS REYNOLDS found his horse well taken care of. The man who owned the feed barn and corral was back at the Lone Star Saloon and there was only a sleepy Mexican barn man around.

There were about thirty head of good saddle horses in the feed corral. Most of them wore the Rafter A brand. The Alamos Cattle Company kept plenty of horses here in town, apparently, because there were only three or four cowpunchers back at the saloon.

Moss was prompted by more than idle curiosity right now as he looked over these horses, reading their brands, getting a count on them, studying out which and how many of them had recently been ridden. And then when he found a stout, well fed horse that showed no signs of having been ridden the past few days—a horse that wore Buck Jimson's J brand on the left thigh—he tied that fact in with the other information that his cowman's savvy was figuring out.

When he heard the jingle of spurs, Moss slipped into a box stall at the far end of the barn and waited.

One of the cowpunchers he had seen in the saloon came into the barn and got his outfit from the saddle room. He roped the big bay gelding that wore the Buck Jimson J brand.

Moss let the cowpuncher saddle the horse, then he stepped out of the box stall.

The man made a move towards his six-shooter, then changed his mind. There was something about that big green-eyed cowpuncher with the bandaged red head that chilled the fear in a man of lesser courage.

"Whichaway, cowboy?" asked Moss. "An' don't lie."

"Back to Texas. I'll overtake the others somewhere near Magdalena, in New Mexico. I got left behind. I was drunk an' I got to gamblin' some. Kinda had my head under me when Buck Jimson an' the other boys pulled out. So when I sobered up—"

Moss Reynolds reached out with his left hand and grabbed the front of the cowpuncher's shirt up near the unbuttoned collar. He yanked the man off balance and slapped him hard across the mouth.

"I told you not to lie," he said quietly. "Now spill it."

The man's mouth was bleeding. The

color had drained from his tanned face and fear showed in his shifting eyes.

"Don't beat me up. Buck Jimson give me orders to stay behind here at Alamos, to see if you lived or died. Then to fetch him the news. That's the truth, mister, so help me!"

"But not all of it. You got a message for Buck Jimson. What is it?"

"Spaden said to tell Buck to fetch along more cattle. Another trail herd. That the Alamos Cattle Company was buyin' all the cattle they could git."

"And what did Spaden tell you to pass on to Buck Jimson about me? All I want is the truth, feller. Lie to me and I'll break your neck. Let's have it."

"Spaden said to tell Buck that you was wearin' Van Carter's badge. That he'd had that law badge pinned on you a-purpose. For Buck not to worry about you because he had his own way of handlin' you. And that's all there is to tell, mister. I ain't lyin'."

"Then hit the trail. And if I was you I'd forget about me collarin' you and talkin' to you. Just forget it. Git goin'."

When the cowpuncher had ridden away, Moss Reynolds went back up the street. He got a shave and haircut at the hotel barbershop and then went into the dining room to supper. He saw the bartender Mac eating alone at a corner table and joined him. The paunchy Mac welcomed him with a wide grin.

"It's bin a long time, Moss. . . . You was a slim ol' kid last time we et together. Remember the pie I'd hide out from the boys an' feed you when you fetched my wood an' water on the round-up? I heard somewheres that your daddy was dead."

Moss Reynolds nodded. "He was murdered, Mac. He was fetchin' a big trail herd to Arizona. He got as far as Alamos with his cattle. Somewheres near Alamos the herd was stampeded and my dad, Sam Reynolds and his cowhands were killed. You might know more about it."

"I ain't bin here but a few months, Moss. And Spaden don't talk. When was Sam Reynolds killed? When did he lose his herd?"

"Two years ago. It's taken me that long to pick up the cold trail. None of his cowhands ever come back alive. They were either killed or they didn't dare come back for one reason or another. . . . Van Carter was one of his cowpunchers."

Mac whistled soundlessly. "I begin to savvy, Moss."

"I didn't want to kill Van Carter. I wanted to ask him a few questions. But he crowded the play."

"It all happened shore fast," wheezed Mac.

Moss Reynolds nodded. "Who shot out the lights, Mac? Who killed those two J cowhands? And who nicked my skull with a bullet tryin' to kill me?"

Mac shifted uneasily on his chair. He was sweating a little and his beefy face reddened. His grin was apologetic. "When the shootin' started I made a dive for the floor. I'm no fightin' man. Then Spaden called to me in the dark that the shootin' was over. To light a lamp.

"There's a house rule at the Lone Star that when a fight starts Spaden's two dealers or Spaden—whoever is handiest at the time—will shoot out the lights.

"When I got the lamp lit I seen Spaden knock two empty shells outa his gun. The two dealers was gone. There was two dead men on the floor and you looked dead.

"Buck Jimson said that the two J cowpunchers had bin layin' for one another all along the trail. That they'd taken that chance to shoot out an old grudge. But Buck Jimson lied. Neither of them two dead cowpunchers had a gun in his hand when we found 'em."

"So," wheezed the sweating Mac, "I can't tell you much about who did the shootin'. But it's my guess that Buck Jimson killed them two cowpunchers. Or Spaden could have killed 'em. Unless, as

he wants me to think, he used them two bullets to shoot out the lights. Black Jack Spaden don't miss when he pulls a gun-trigger, Moss. That gambler is as fast with a gun as he is with a deck of cards."

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THAT was all that Moss Reynolds was going to get out of Mac. He knew that and didn't waste time with any more questions. Perhaps Mac knew more than he was telling. Mac was probably afraid of Spaden. That gambler was a cold blooded hombre. Moss wasn't blaming Mac for not talking.

"Somebody," Moss grinned across the table, "wasn't shootin' to miss when he parted my hair with a bullet."

"You couldn't see who was shootin' at you, Moss?"

"I was shot," said Moss Reynolds grimly, "*after* the lights was shot out. I stood in the doorway and the moonlight was behind me."

The waitress brought Moss his supper and Mac pushed back his chair. He stuck a quill toothpick in his mouth and said something about having to get back to work. He seemed anxious to get away, and Moss let him go.

Doc Steel joined Moss. Here was the one man at Alamos who did not pack a gun, took no part in local politics or quarrels, and told the truth.

Doc ordered his supper and when the Mexican waitress had gone, he leaned across the oilcloth covered table.

"Why don't you throw that badge away and quit this part of the country, Reynolds?" he spoke in a low tone. "You might not get off with a creased skull the next time."

Moss Reynolds grinned and shook his head. "A six-mule team couldn't drag me away from Alamos, Doc." He fingered the bullet scarred badge.

"You must have a mighty strong reason for staying."

Moss nodded. "A mighty strong reason, Doc."

He had changed his mind about asking the little doctor any questions. This wasn't the time nor the place. The sign wasn't right. Doc was passing him a friendly warning, and Moss was refusing to act on it. Let it go at that for now.

"Then you know what you're stepping into," Doc broke a short silence.

"I know that it's no job for a pilgrim. That the town marshal is supposed to take his orders from Judge Barbee and Black Jack Spaden. But this time they pinned their law badge on the wrong man. I can't be bought off and I don't scare easy."

"And Jack Spaden knew it," nodded Doc. "He's using you to antagonize Judge Barbee. Just as the Judge tried to use Van Carter to bother Spaden."

"What's the feud between the two

pardners of the Alamos Cattle Company, Doc?"

"Judge Barbee had a son. An only son, Ward Barbee. Ward was killed one night across the street at the Lone Star Saloon. He was sort of a wild kid. But he was a good cowman. He ran the Rafter A outfit. Out on the range he worked hard and worked his men hard. When he came to town he drank too much and liked to gamble.

"The Judge was sick in bed; down with a bad case of pneumonia. It was a week before I dared let him know his son had been killed.

"Ward Barbee's death is a sort of mystery. A gun-fight started. The lights were shot out. When the lamp was lighted Ward Barbee was there on the floor by the poker table, shot in the head.

"The Judge blames Spaden for his son's death. Spaden swore he had nothing to do with it. Jack Spaden has his faults, but he don't lie. He won't tell a lie or cheat at cards. It's his gambler's code and he lives up to it.

"Spaden did his best to convince the Judge he had nothing to do with Ward's killing. The Judge has to believe him. But the bitterness is there, just the same. And until Spaden proves himself blameless for the killing of Ward Barbee, that bitter feud will exist."

"Was Buck Jimson in town that night Ward Barbee was killed?" asked Moss.

Doc Steel nodded. "Buck Jimson had just delivered a trail herd at the Rafter A ranch. He and his outfit were in town celebrating. Why did you ask that question?"

Moss Reynolds felt of the bandage around his head. "Somebody tried to shoot me in the head. Ward Barbee was shot in the head. Buck Jimson was in the Lone Star Saloon both times. Buck Jimson has built himself a tough rep as a gun-slinger."

Moss grinned. "A man's head makes a hard target. Most gun fighters shoot at a man's chest or his belly. . . . But it might not mean anything. From what I've heard, Buck Jimson has shot more than one man in the back."

The Mexican waitress brought Doc Steel's supper and Moss finished his dried apple pie and washed it down with black coffee. He took a roll of money from his pocket and tossed it on the table.

"There's no way of thankin' a man who has saved your life, Doc. But I want you to keep that bankroll. I'll live off the salary Barbee and Spaden pay their marshal.

He grinned and shook his head at Doc's protests. As he left the dining room he met Judge Barbee.

"I've been waiting for a chance to talk to you, suh. A private little talk. My office."

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MOSS followed the Judge into the latter's private office. He took a chair but refused a drink.

"Regardless of your opinion of me and my court, suh," Judge Barbee started without his usual preamble of flowery speech, "or whatever you may have heard concerning the Alamos Cattle Company and my pardnership with Jack Spaden—regardless of everything else, there is one matter of vital importance I'd like to discuss with you.

"My only son, Ward Barbee, was killed in the Lone Star Saloon. Doc Steel can furnish you with what vague details surround my son's murder."

"He told me what little there was to tell about it," said Moss.

"Very well. Find the man who killed my son. I'll attend to that man. All I ask is that you find him. Show me proof that you've found the murderer. And—you can name your own price, suh."

Moss Reynolds rolled and lit a brown

paper cigarette. Then he got to his feet. There was no doubting the sincerity of the white-maned Judge. Grief dimmed the sharpness of his eyes. He poured himself a drink and downed it. Then he held his hand toward the new town marshal.

"We'll shake on it, Judge," said Moss Reynolds, "But not until after I've got the job done."

He left the Judge scowling after him a little bewildered. He crossed the street to the Lone Star.

It was too early in the evening for the drinking men of the town to gather. Save for Mac and Black Jack Spaden the saloon was empty.

Spaden sat alone at a green cloth covered table playing solitaire.

"I'll make a little bet," said the gambler, "that you've been talking to Judge Barbee. That the Judge has offered you his share of the town of Alamos, if you'd point out to him the man who killed his son."

"You win the bet," nodded Moss.

"You might have made a deal with the Judge," Spaden's thin lips twisted, "that you'd hunt down his son's killer on condition that he'd tell you who killed your father."

Moss stared down at the gambler. Spaden motioned for him to sit down. And when he was seated across the green covered table the gambler gathered the cards in his long fingered hands and began riffling the deck.

"You'll find the remnants of those Rail R cattle on the Alamos range," said Spaden. "And I'll show you Sam Reynolds' grave in the Alamos boothill. But I'm afraid you killed the only man who might have been able to give you any details of your father's death. . . ."

"The Alamos Cattle Company got the Rail R trail herd." Moss Reynolds spoke quietly in his lazy Texan drawl.

Spaden nodded. "That trail herd was in Buck Jimson's J road iron when Ward Barbee, ramrodding the Rafter A outfit, made the deal for the cattle with Buck Jimson and Van Carter. Ward Barbee made the deal for those cattle and took delivery. It was after Ward's death that we found out the trail herd had been stolen. That the owner, Sam Reynolds, had been killed. . . . Killed here in the Lone Star not a week before."

"Who killed my father, Spaden?" Moss Reynolds' voice did not raise above its level tone.

"Sam Reynolds was shot in a saloon ruckus while the lights were out. I don't know who fired the shot."

"And they claim," said Moss Reynolds grimly, "that you never lie."

"I don't deal a crooked game, Reynolds. "I don't tell lies."

I kin take that," said Moss quietly, "or leave it."

"Exactly."

"Was Buck Jimson in the saloon when my father was shot in the head?"

"He might have been. He probably was here. So was Van Carter."

"Van Carter," said Moss, "was already dead when somebody clipped my skull with a bullet."

"Meaning?"

"Meanin', Spaden, that the man who ripped my scalp with a .45 slug is the same gent, mebby, who killed my father and Ward Barbee. That feller shoots at a man's head. For some reason his aim was bad when he shot at me after the lights went out."

"And I can take that or leave it?" smiled the gambler thinly.

"Yeah."

Moss got to his feet, shoving back his chair. He grinned flatly at Spaden, then walked over to the bar where Mac had been polishing the same whiskey glass for the past several minutes.

"Kin you still cook up a son-of-a-gun in the sack, Mac?"

"I wouldn't doubt it, Moss."

"When the new marshal of Alamos cleans up this town, I'll hire you to build a son-of-a-gun by way of celebratin'. Goodnight, Mac. I'm beddin' down with the chickens."

CHAPTER FOUR

Boss of the Santa Anita

MARSHAL MOSS REYNOLDS had Doc Steel tape a less bulky bandage on his head so that he could wear his hat. Then he went to his room in the hotel. He pulled the shades down before he lit the lamp low. Then he bolted the door and pulled off his boots. It had been a strenuous day for his first up from a sick bed. But he was big and tough and those five days in bed had rested him more than anything else. And now when he awoke after a few hours sleep he felt ready to go again.

There was a huge pitcher and wash bowl and the cold water washed the sleep from his eyes. He grinned at his reflection in the shaving mirror over the wash stand. The bandage around his head gave him a sort of piratical look. He blew out the lamp and lifted the window shade and sat in a chair by the open window with his hat on and his cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter buckled around his lean middle.

His room on the upstairs floor of the two-storied hotel gave him a panoramic view of the town's wide, dusty street. The only sign of life was over at the Lone Star Saloon.

It was nearly midnight, Moss figured, when his patient waiting and watching from the darkened room was rewarded.

Half a dozen cowpunchers rode into town. They rode in pairs, traveling at a slow trot, quietly as if they were on business instead of pleasure. They stopped at the hitchrack in front of the Lone Star and went into the saloon. They kept their chaps on and Moss took that as a sign that they would not stay long at the bar.

He guessed right. They stayed inside long enough for a drink and then came out and got on their horses and rode down the street to the feed barn and corral.

A man came across the street from the Lone Star and Moss recognized him. It was Black Jack Spaden. He came into the hotel, and into the small bar where Judge Barbee and his cronies from the right side of the street did their quiet drinking and card playing.

A few minutes later Moss heard somebody come upstairs and down the hallway to his room. He lay on his bed and gave a good imitation of a man snoring. He moved a little so that the bed springs creaked. Somebody rapped cautiously on his door but he did no more than roll over and snore. He heard the doorknob turn. Finding the door bolted on the inside, the would-be intruder moved on down the hallway again and down the stairs, making as little noise as possible.

Moss was back at the window now. He had only a few minutes to wait before he saw Spaden come out of the hotel and walk rapidly down the deserted street to the feed barn.

A little while later the six cowpunchers rode away into the night and the gambler came back to his saloon across the street.

Moss crawled feet first through the open window, hung for a second or two by his hands, gauged the distance to the ground below and dropped. It was about a twenty foot drop and he landed with his knees limber enough to absorb the brunt of the shock. Then he slipped around the rear of the building, keeping to the black shadows of the hotel wall, moving cautiously.

There was a rear stairway with a little lean-to shed at the door. Moss could make out the shadowy form of a man sitting on a beer keg, his head sagging forward, dozing. A gun was across his lap.

Moss slid his six-shooter from its hol-

ster and crept up behind the dozing guard. The long-barreled pistol lifted and came down on the man's head with a short chopping blow. The man grunted and rolled sideways off his keg, a sawed-off shotgun sliding off onto the ground.

It took no more than a minute to tie the man's wrists and ankles with wide strips ripped from the unconscious man's heavy flannel shirt, then gag him with his silk neck handkerchief. The man was one of the burly guards who had been in his room. Moss grinned as he dropped the guard's hat across his face.

There was nobody at the feed barn. Half a dozen gaunt-flanked, sweat-marked horses were in the corral. Moss caught and saddled his own horse and rode out of town. He rode in the direction he had seen the six night-riding cowpunchers take, traveling at a long trot.

So far as he could tell, Moss had gotten out of his hotel room and out of town without being seen. Perhaps he was riding on some sort of a futile errand, but his curiosity was aroused by those extra Rafter A horses that were kept in town, those six night-riding cowhands who had changed horses there and gone on. There was something stealthy about the whole proceedings. And that guard had not been placed at the door of the rear stairway just for the hell of it.

After an hour passed, Moss Reynolds was beginning to wonder if his hunch had been wrong, or if he had taken the wrong direction. He was almost in the notion of turning back when off in the distance he heard the blurred sounds of cattle being moved.

It was rough, broken country, spotted with brush and scrub pinon trees.

Fifteen minutes later, Moss Reynolds sat his horse on a short ridge and watched the cowpunchers shoving a bunch of cattle into a huge corral that was joined to another big corral by a branding chute. There was a large branding fire burning and its glow showed the movements of the cowpunchers. As the drags were crowded through the gateway of the big corral, a couple of riders were already filling the small corral that was connected with the branding chute by long wings. Cattle were being prodded into the chute, caught in the squeezer, branded, then prodded into the big corral beyond.

Through the bawling of cattle threaded the sounds of men's voices, calling back and forth to one another. Now and then there would be a few words of broken English. But most of the talk was in the Mexican language; snatches of Mexican songs and now and then laughter at some ribald verse or some shouted remark. Only Mexican vaqueros work like that, taking their hard work and dust and sweat with a song and a laugh.

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MOSS dismounted and squatted on his boot heels. The Mexicans should be working under a gringo boss, and he kept waiting to hear the sound of that gringo boss's voice. But only the Mexicans were calling back and forth to one another.

They would be branding until sunrise and after sunrise. But Moss wanted to get back to Alamos by the time dawn broke.

Finally he mounted his horse and rode down the slope. He rode boldly, as a man rides when he is going to meet friends. As if he belonged to the outfit and came on open business.

The Mexicans moved back and forth between the fire and squeezer with cherry red branding irons. Others kept along the chute on foot with prod poles. The riders inside the corrals did not even notice him as he rode up.

The Mexicans at the branding fire and along the chute halted in their work, staring at him as he rode up.

"Vaqueros!" Moss called out.

"Amigos!" Then speaking their own language with the ease of a Border-raised Texan, he asked about their boss.

Nobody answered. They eyed him now with suspicion. One or two of them slid furtive hands toward their guns. They were staring at his law badge that glinted in the red reflection of the branding fire.

Moss Reynolds had ridden up with a wide grin on his face. Now that grin slowly died and his eyes were narrowed hard green slits.

"Pronto, hombres! Who is your boss? Where is he? It is the Law who talks to you! Keep away from your guns!"

A tall slim cowhand straddling the far corral at the end of the branding chute, tally book and stubby pencil in hand, looked down at him from under the brim of a low pulled hat. Then he shoved the tally book and pencil into the pocket of a pair of brush scarred chaps.

"I'm ramrodding this outfit. Better take it easy, mister."

Moss Reynolds stiffened in his saddle. That was a woman's voice. Then he recovered from his shock of surprise and grinned slowly, pulling off his hat.

Her face was in the shadow of her hat, but Moss saw her white teeth flash in a quick smile. Then she laughed. It was a throaty, husky laugh that matched her voice.

"You must be the new town marshal of Alamos," she mocked him, "with a head so hard that bullets bounce off it."

She spoke in the Mexican language. The Mexicans around the branding fire grinned through their dirt and sweat.

"I'm Moss Reynolds," he told her. "Now who are you?"

"Then they didn't tell you at Alamos about Anita Spaden?" There was a gay mockery in her voice but it was tinged with a sort of bitterness and defiance that puzzled Moss.

"Nobody" he said, "told me about Anita Spaden. You're Jack Spaden's—"

"Shirt-tail cousin—the sharp thorn in the side of the Barbee-Spaden Alamos Cattle Company. The knife in their backs. They've got harder names for me. It's either an insult or a compliment that the Judge and Black Jack have not given you my pedigree. . . . Chico, take the tally book and pencil. Get on with the branding, *muchachos.*"

She handed the tally book to a tall, lean, gray-mustached Mexican with a knife-scarred face and one shriveled hand. Then she jumped down from the corral and walked into the firelight.

"Light," she told Moss, "and rest your saddle."

Standing there now in the firelight Moss got a good look at her. She was tall and slim as a boy. She took off her hat and shook a mop of thick curly black hair that glinted with reddish highlights in the glow of the branding fire.

Her face was tanned, healthy looking. Her eyes were smokey gray, fringed by heavy black lashes that darkened them with shadow. Her nose was short and straight, her red-lipped mouth a trifle wide. She wore her brush-scarred cowpuncher clothes like she belonged in them. She spilled tobacco from a muslin sack into a brown paper, rolled it and lit it deftly.

"There a bottle of good tequila there by the water bucket if you want a drink. You look like you need one."

"I reckon I do," he told her. "Meetin' a girl like you here is a jolt."

"Who did you expect to find here?"

"I didn't know who I'd find."

He watched the brand that the Mexican was stamping on a steer in the squeezer.

"Heart," he read it aloud.

"Ace of Hearts," she corrected him. "My iron. My lucky card."

"Where'd this bunch of cattle come from?" he asked bluntly.

"Read the road iron on their hides."

The next steer in the squeezer kicked

and bawled. The bottle of tequila in his hand, Moss walked over to the chute. The steer wore Buck Jimson's road iron—J on the left thigh.

"My cut of the last Buck Jimson trail herd," she told him.

Moss Reynolds lifted the bottle and grinned. "Here's luck, lady."

"Maybe," she flashed him a quick smile, "I need it. That what you mean? Or aren't you here to make a six-shooter cut on those J cattle?"

"Mebbyso," he put the bottle back alongside the bucket of water, "I never slipped outa my hotel room tonight. Or if I did, I got lost before I got here. But most mebby I'm night blind and can't read brands in the dark."

"And you're the tough hombre that told Alamos he was going to live up to his oath of office. That he was going to make a Winchester cut on that last Buck Jimson trail herd. Am I supposed to buy you off with cash, or do I let you make love to me? Van Carter was the last badge-polisher that told me he already had enough money but he was short on love."

"And what did Van Carter git?" grinned Moss Reynolds.

"I heard he got killed."

Moss rolled and lit a cigarette. When he spoke his voice was a lazy drawl and his grin belied the green hardness of his eyes.

"You haven't got enough money to buy me off if there's stolen cattle in that J iron. I don't go around pawin' at ladies or crowdin' myself at 'em. And I kin git my law job done without makin' war on female wimmin. I'll finish my smoke and ride back to Alamos. You don't owe me a thing. Nothin'." There was a harsh edge to his voice.

SHE put out a slim tanned hand and touched his arm as he started to get up from where he squatted on his boot heels beside her.

"You're what they call almighty prideful, aren't you, Moss Reynolds? So am I. A girl playing a lone hand has to keep her guard up. There are plenty of the Van Carter breed in this part of the cow-country. You don't belong to that breed. And I'm not that kind of a gal. Shake hands?"

Moss matched her quick smile with a wide grin. They shook hands without getting to their feet.

"My Santa Anita ranch is only about ten miles from here," she told him. "I'm not trying to buy you off when I ask you to ride on home with me for breakfast. Chico is my range boss. He'll brand and tally the rest of the cattle. Or do you have to get back to Alamos?"

"I don't have to git back anywhere," he told her, the hardness gone from his green eyes. "I'd be mighty proud to eat breakfast at your Santa Anita ranch, lady."

"Anita."

"Anita. My friends call me Moss."

"Then let's go, Moss."

Anita Spaden spoke to Chico in his native tongue. Then she called out to a curly headed Mexican she called Chino to sing his new song about El Pelirrojo, the Red-Headed One.

The curly headed Chino grinned. Old Chico chuckled softly. Moss Reynolds grinned widely as the Mexican sang the little ranchero song he had made up about the red headed town marshal of Alamos, whose head was so hard that bullets bounced off it like the hail from a tin roof.

That called for a drink. The Mexicans drank from a jug. Moss from the bottle. When he offered the bottle of tequila to Anita Spaden she tilted it up and took a small swallow.

Everybody was in a high good humor as Moss Reynolds and Anita Spaden rode away together. The words of Chino's song following them.

The curly-haired Mexican was a quick-

witted troubador. He was already making up still another verse for his song, with the shy boldness of a small boy singing behind his teacher's back:

"El Pelirrojo is big and strong
And very brave and perhaps bold also.
He killed that *cabrón* Van Carter
Because that evil one had bad manners
And a wicked heart inside him.
And now it is good to see him ride in the moonlight
With the beautiful Señorita, our Patrón
For whom we would all die a thousand times.
And we believe that perhaps the Red-Headed One
Is a true caballero who killed that Evil One
Because perhaps in a moonlight dream
He met the Señorita Anita
And a brave man kills quickly for one he loves!"

Anita's tanned face flushed a little in the moonlight. Moss felt his face redden hotly. But he promised himself that he would buy all the tequila that Chino and the rest of the loyal outfit could drink.

"I kept them from killing Van Carter," she told Moss. "They were ready to kill you tonight if you'd acted the wrong way."

She told him that she worked only Mexicans. They were loyal and could not be bribed or intimidated. They were hand-picked. Judge Barbee and Black Jack Spaden had not enough money or enough guns to make any of her vaqueros turn against her.

"You don't think much of Barbee and Spaden, then?"

For a short moment her flecked smoke-gray eyes darkened. Then she laughed softly.

"I'm the sand burr in the Rafter A blankets."

They were a mile or more from the corrals now, riding along in the moonlight, their stirrups touching now and then. The trail narrowed where it dropped into a deep arroyo so that they had to travel single file.

The girl led the way on a high-headed palamino that had been spooking at its own shadow. Now, riding about fifty feet in the lead down the slope where the junipers were thick black clumps on both sides of the trail her horse snorted, whirled, lunged off the trail and down the slant, kicking rocks. Moss watched her, grinning.

"Look out back there, Moss!" he heard her shout. "Something wrong!"

Moss jerked his six-shooter as a man on a sleek black gelding rode out from behind a big clump of junipers.

"Put it away, Reynolds."

The rider on the black horse was Black Jack Spaden. His right hand was shoved out of sight under a short black leather jacket and Moss knew that the gambler was gripping the ivory handled gun he wore in an armpit holster.

Moss kept his gun in his hand as he rode to meet Spaden. He was breathing a little hard, fighting to control his red-headed temper.

"I don't take orders from any man. Take your hand off that gun or I'll gut shoot yuh. Pronto!"

Spaden's teeth bared in a flat-lipped mirthless grin. His yellow eyes glittered in the moonlight like a cougar's.

Then Anita Spaden jumped her palamino bronc up the slant in long, snorting, lunging leaps and rode between the two men.

"Quit it!" her voice was brittle. "What are you doing here, Jack?"

"From where I'm settin' my pony," said Moss, "it looks like he'd fixed up a little bushwhacker trap, then lost his nerve."

"Quit it, Moss. Jack Spaden's no bushwhacker. And he don't lose his nerve. No gun-play. Please." It was more of a sharp

command than any sort of a woman's plea.

"Anita," the gambler's right hand came into sight with an unlighted black Mexican cigarette, "is this big sorrel-maned hombre bothering you?"

She crowded her palamino alongside the gambler's sleek looking black gelding. Then away again.

So far as Moss Reynolds could tell, no word of any kind passed between the girl and the gambler. But when Moss got a closer look at her he saw that her cheeks that a moment before had been drained of color, were now flushed a little and her eyes were dark and shining. But her smile was forced.

"Moss Reynolds and I are friends, Jack. Put up your gun, Moss."

"When Black Jack Spaden rides outa range," said the big, red-headed Texan, "I'll put away my gun. Mebby I'm kinda spooky. But I don't like men that bush up along my trail."

Jack Spaden smiled thinly. "I cold trailed you from town, Reynolds. You sneaked out of your room. Anita's vaqueros were handling a bunch of cattle and you'd said something about a Winchester cut. I wasn't going to let her get into trouble with the Law."

It was a plausible enough statement, but Moss had a notion that the gambler was lying.

The gambler's poker face had not changed expression but for the fraction of a minute when her horse brushed his, the man's yellow eyes had lost their hard glitter. And the color had flooded back into Anita Spaden's cheeks. Some sort of wordless message had passed between Anita and Jack Spaden, and Moss Reynolds was quivering inside with a cold fury that he refused to admit was jealousy.

Jack Spaden pulled the head of a match across his thumbnail and lit his black paper Mexican cigarette. The faint but unmistakable odor of marijuana mingled with the cleaner smell of tobacco smoke.

Then the gambler lifted his black hat, bowed mockingly in his saddle and whirling his restless black horse around, rode off through the moonlight and black shadows of junipers.

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ANITA'S lower lip was caught between her white teeth. Her eyes were dark as she watched the man she called a "shirt-tail cousin" ride away into the night. But when she turned to Moss again, her red lips were smiling. And a couple of drops of blood clung like scarlet dew to her lower lip where she had bitten it.

"Black Jack Spaden," said Moss quietly, "the square gambler that never cheats at cards or tells a lie. I'm beginnin' to wonder."

"It couldn't be," Anita's smoke gray eyes mocked him, "that you're just a little bit jealous, Moss?"

Her high headed palamino was alongside his horse now. He leaned from his saddle, reached out a long arm. Kissed her roughly on her red mouth. Then let her go.

The girl's face whitened. Then her cheekbones were stained red. For a second or two Moss thought she was going to break into some sort of wildcat fury. Then the sparks of anger died in her dark gray eyes and she laughed. It was a short, throaty laugh.

"If you could see the look on your face, Pelirrojo. Black as a thunder cloud! That's the first time I was ever kissed by a man who wanted to wring my neck!"

Moss forced some kind of a grin. Then the hot anger went out of his hard green eyes.

If Anita and her damned tinhorn gambler shirt-tail cousin were playing a game, he'd play the cards they dealt him.

"How about that breakfast at the Santa Anita ranch?" he asked.

"You've worked up an appetite? Come along, compadre."

She gave the high-headed palomino its way and went down the trail at a reckless headlong run.

Moss Reynolds followed more slowly. On the other side of the barranca the trail widened and they again rode side by side. She patted the sweaty neck of her horse with a buckskin gloved hand and tugged at the dark golden mane.

"He'll quit throwing his head when I get in another ride or two on him. I don't like a high-headed star gazer. But that's a good name for him, no? Star Gazer."

She talked horse for a mile or so. She owned a palamino stud, one of the golden horses out of Mexico. A direct descendant from the famous golden horses that a Queen of Spain had sent to the President of Mexico. Some of his colts were tawny-maned; others silver maned. Now and then there would be a colt with a black mane and tail.

"There is one big line-backed gelding with a black mane and tail. He'll carry a man anywhere and fetch him back. Four-years old, and I'm the only one who has ever been on his back. He's wicked as sin. I call him Diablo—Satan. He's yours to keep, Moss. You'll never be afoot on that horse."

Moss Reynolds was caught off guard. He had heard of men giving horses to girls they loved. Or a man giving a horse to another man he valued as a friend. But this was the first time he had ever heard of a girl giving a horse to a man. He didn't know what to say. He could not figure out what the gesture meant.

"You can't read brands at night," she laughed at him. "Diablo is a bribe, Mister Town Marshal of Alamos."

"I'd like to think it was somethin' else," he blurted awkwardly.

"There's no law against your thinking what you want to think, compadre."

"Compadres," he nodded. "Pardners."

"I want it to be like that. Always, Moss."

"Nothin' more than just pardners?"

"Until an hour or two ago," she told him, "we'd never seen one another. You didn't even know I existed. For that short a time, we've gone a long ways together. Perhaps with more time. . . ."

"Jack Spaden loves you," said Moss. "Mebby you love him. I don't know. I'm not askin' because I'm scared of your answer. I'm at Alamos to git an ugly job tended to. Mebbyso you'll hate me plenty before I git that job done. But I'm givin' Black Jack Spaden a hard race for it."

"Good luck to you, Moss. You'll need it. But—Good luck!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Branded Coward

NEARLY a week later Moss Reynolds rode back to the little trail town of Alamos on the big line-backed dun horse, Diablo.

For a week, from the crack of dawn until dark, riding a string of Heart horses that there were as good a string of cow horses as he'd ever saddled, Moss had ridden the Heart and Alamos ranges with Anita Spaden. He'd worked with her crew of Mexicans, riding long, hard circles. Roping, branding, making a top-hand.

In his tally book was a list of stray brands. Brands worn by the remnants of the Reynolds Rail R and other cattle that had been trailed from Texas by different outfit or by Buck Jimson.

Anita Spaden was as good a cowhand as ever he had worked with. There was little about horses and cattle that any man could tell her. She could take the pitch out of a horse or rope wild cattle with the fastest Mexican vaquero in her crew.

She knew about the killing of Sam Rey-

nolds and the theft of the Rail R herd. But what she knew added little to the knowledge Moss had already picked up.

"I don't know who killed your father, Moss. I wasn't there. And only the men who were there could tell you."

"I know that Ward Barbee was killed by the same man who killed my father," Moss told her. "They were both shot in the head."

"My father was killed three years ago," Anita Spaden said tonelessly. "His name was Mike Spaden. That Spade N brand you see on some of the cows on my range, was his iron.

that, you see, made us compadres. Pardners."

She gave him a stiff-lipped smile.

"In your heart and mind, Moss, you're acusing Black Jack Spaden. But I can't believe it he's the killer.

"Jack's father and my father were cousins. They were partners in the Spade N outfit. Both were hard men. I've been told by Jack that they got their start fetching stolen cattle out of Mexico. And Jack should know.

"When Jack's father was shot and killed, my father bought Jack's inherited interest in the Spade N outfit. Jack's a

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"Mike Spaden," she finished in that same toneless voice, "was killed in the Lone Star Saloon. There was a ruckus. The lights were shot out. When the lamp was lit Mike Spaden was dead. He had been shot through the back of the head."

"Who is it," Moss asked bluntly, "that shoots in the dark. Shoots at a man's head?"

"If I knew the answer to that question," Anita Spaden touched the carved ivory handle of a .38 six-shooter, "I'd have answered it with this. Long ago."

Her red lipped mouth had thinned to a straight, hard line. Her black-flecked smoke-gray eyes held no spark of laughter now.

"When old Chico told me about a Moss Reynolds killing Van Carter," she went on after a short silence, "I knew you must be some kin to the Sam Reynolds who had been killed in the Lone Star Saloon at Alamos. That you had come to Alamos to square his debt. And

top-hand but he prefers town and gambling to punching cows.

"I was born and raised on the Spade N ranch that is now the home ranch of the Alamos Cattle Company. I was sent to school and spent my vacations on the ranch. My mother died when I was eight years old. I grew up wild there on the ranch.

"My mother was part Mexican. She inherited the old Santa Anita Grant. She left it to me. And I owned my own brand, the Ace of Hearts. I fixed up the old adobe buildings and orchard. When my father was killed I sold the Spade N home ranch to the Alamos Cattle Company and moved to the Santa Anita ranch.

"The Alamos Cattle Company paid partly in cash. The balance is still being paid in cattle. Those cattle you caught us branding made up the final payment."

"You want me to believe that you hate the Alamos Cattle Company," said Moss. "Why?"

"Would you like to be paid off in stolen cattle?"

"And that's the only reason you claim to hate Judge Barbee and Jack Spaden?"

"I didn't want you to ask me that, Moss. Because I can't answer you. Not now. Not yet. Some day, perhaps. Let it go at that, compadre."

So Moss Reynolds had to let it go at that. But he knew from little things that had been partly said or not said at all, that the death of Anita's father, and the killing of Ward Barbee had a lot to do with it.

He wondered if she had been in love with Ward Barbee. Or if Ward Barbee had been in love with Anita Spaden. Which brought Moss Reynolds straight back to the gambler, Black Jack Spaden.

"You're wrong, Moss." She had read his thoughts. "Mike Spaden was like a father to Jack. And Black Jack Spaden and Ward Barbee were close friends. Or as close as that shirt-tail cousin of mine ever lets himself get to any sort of friendship. Buck Jimson might be a good bet. Or Van Carter."

"Van Carter was dead when somebody tried to shoot me in the head after the lights were shot out," said Moss.

"And the man who shot at your head," smiled Anita Spaden, "did no more than bounce a bullet off your skull. It could have been some man using Van Carter's trademark."

But Moss Reynolds did not think so. "I ducked just as the lights went out. That made him crease my scalp. It wasn't much of a miss, at that."

So now Moss Reynolds was riding his buckskin gift horse back to Alamos. He timed his arrival so that Black Jack Spaden would be certain to see him ride down the middle of the dusty main street on the line-backed dun that was a present from Anita Spaden.

Judge Barbee and Doc Steel, talking together in front of the hotel, saw him and nodded a curt greeting to the town marshal.

Black Jack Spaden stood just outside the swinging half-doors of his Lone Star Saloon riffling a deck of cards. His poker face never change expression. He riffled the deck of cards and smiled thinly.

One thing marred the triumph of Moss's return to town. There had been no smile on the face of little Doc Steel. No sign of friendly greeting.

A chill of foreboding put an empty feeling in the pit of Moss Reynolds' stomach. Something was wrong. He had not expected the kindly, brown-eyed little Doc to turn against him. He wondered just what he had done to incur that coldness from Doc.

It wasn't anything trivial. The rest of the town that had made him town marshal had never pretended anything but a sort of cold appraisal and suspicion of him. But Doc Steel had saved his life and given Moss the warmth of a sincere friendship.

★

MOSS put his Diablo horse up at the feed barn, then walked back up the street to the Lone Star. The pot-bellied Mac would have his own brand of welcome for the red-headed Texan he'd known as a boy.

Black Jack Spaden had gone back inside. He sat at his far table dealing poker hands and betting one hand against the others without turning the cards face up.

Mac was behind the bar polishing a glass. As Moss came in Mac's face seemed to redden and he polished the already shining whiskey glass with renewed energy. His grin was sickly.

"What's good for hydrophobia, Mac?" grinned Moss.

"Hydrophobia?" wheezed Mac, almost dropping the glass.

"I've got it. A bad case, from all the sign I read. A shot of likker, Mac."

Mac cut a covert look towards Black Jack Spaden. The gambler did not look up from his cards.

"I was hopin' to hell, Moss," wheezed Mac's whiskey voice in what he meant for a whisper, "that you'd never show up here no more."

Mac set a whiskey glass and a bottle of whiskey on the bar and deliberately walked away.

Moss could take it as an insult or as a warning that the bartender could not talk in front of the gambler who paid his wages. And there had been something almost pathetic in Mac's gooseberry eyes. Moss filled his glass and downed it, then walked out of the saloon and across the street to the hotel.

Judge Barbee and Doc Steel were no longer in sight. The door to the Judge's office was closed. His small private bar was empty save for the Mexican bartender.

Moss went next door to the general store and bought himself a new change of clothes and carried the bulky bundle into the barber shop that boasted the biggest tin bathtub at Alamos.

The storekeeper, a nervous man with shrewd small eyes and a tinny voice, was fidgety until Moss had made his purchases and paid for them.

The Mexican barber, however, was apparently the only man in town whose attitude towards the new town marshal remained unchanged. He was fat and smelled of bay rum and talcum powder. He handed Moss a couple of clean towels and a cake of soap. He never lost a chance to practice up on his gringo language.

"Ees like I'm tell my old woman. When I 'ave that damn' gringo een the chair weet the hot towels on the face I should have took the razor and whoosh! Cot hees damn head off, no?"

"What gringo?"

"That one who get so *borrcho*, so dronk. Drag the spurs. Make the talk that he's come back to keel you bot you ron away. That gringo ees call Bock Jimson."

By the time Moss Reynolds got out of the barber shop, bathed, shaved, dressed in clean clothes from the hide to new shirt and a pair of California pants, he had the whole story.

The night Moss had dropped out his window, tied up a guard and ridden out of town, Buck Jimson and his crew of tough cowpunchers had ridden into Alamos ahead of the dawn. They had painted the town red.

Buck Jimson had swaggered and made his loud mouthed fight talk that he had come back to Alamos to gun-whip the new town marshal who had made the brag that he was going to make a Winchester cut on Buck Jimson's trail herd.

Buck Jimson and his cowpunchers had stayed in town two or three days. They were waiting, Jimson claimed, for Moss Reynolds to come back to town and meet his challenge.

Mac and Doc Steel had made excuses for the missing town marshal. Judge Barbee had tugged his goatee and tweaked his own bulbous nose until it was as purple as a ripe plum. Black Jack Spaden had smiled that nasty, thin-lipped smile of his and had sent the two burly deputies out to locate Moss Reynolds. The deputies had come back with the news that Moss had quit the country in a big cloud of dust.

Doc Steel and Mac had been torn between relief and disappointment. Buck Jimson got drunker and claimed that he had sent the new town marshal word that he was coming back to Alamos to run him out of town. And it was only yesterday that the swaggering, loud-mouthed trail boss had taken his crew of tough cowhands and pulled out. And today, after Buck Jimson and his men were gone, the Town Marshal of Alamos had returned. So the tough little cowtown had it figured

out that their new town marshal was a rank coward!

★

MOSS REYNOLDS ate supper alone. As he finished his dried prune pie and last cup of black coffee the Mexican waitress who was one of the barber's children, handed him a folded sheet of writing paper. She seemed embarrassed when Moss grinned and gave her a five dollar bill.

He rolled and lit a cigarette and unfolded the sheet of paper. It was a formally worded notice that there would be a meeting of the citizens of Alamos tonight at eight o'clock. His presence was required.

Moss killed time until eight o'clock, when all the male citizens from both sides of the street were assembled in the hotel dining room. Then he walked in.

The hum and buzz of talk ceased. Moss took the one vacant chair that was apart from the others and obviously meant for him.

Judge Barbee rapped for order and the show was on. The Judge stood there in the lamplight, straight backed, bristling with his own importance.

His speech was brief enough despite its flowery trimmings. The marshal stood accused of gross and flagrant neglect of duty. He had deliberately, without consulting anyone, sneaked out of his hotel room by way of the window and fled town an hour or so before one Buck Jimson and his cowpuncher crew had ridden boldly into town, shot out the windows and lights, taken over the town, and terrorized the citizens. And it was not until said Buck Jimson and his tough cowpunchers had ridden away and the danger was over that the Town Marshal of Alamos had returned.

Moss Reynolds was on trial. He was hereby requested to answer charges of cowardice. The citizens of Alamos demanded that he either show good and sufficient proof for his running away in the night, or turn in his star.

Jack Spaden had nominated Moss Reynolds for marshal, and had been instrumental in his election. Could Jack Spaden bring forth any good and sufficient reasons why Moss Reynolds should not turn in his law badge?

The Judge sat down on that challenge. Spaden got to his feet. Moss sensed what was coming and leaned back in his chair, long legs braced, thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt. There was more amusement than anger in his hard green eyes as he watched the gambler.

Black Jack Spaden took his place in the lamplight with a seeming reluctance. His flat-toned voice had a strange carrying power. He said that it was evident that he had misjudged his man. That he had foisted upon the good citizens of Alamo, a man who was somewhat lacking in the qualities that should mark a law officer.

As for the whereabouts of Moss Reynolds after he had, under the cover of darkness, dropped out his window and sneaked out of town, he, Jack Spaden, could shed some light on that.

Jack Spaden told how he had watched Buck Jimson and his men ride into town. He had gone to Moss Reynolds' room to wake the town marshal. The door of the room was bolted from the inside. The two guards had broken in at Spaden's orders. They found the room empty.

Spaden said he had saddled a horse and gone after the man whose sworn duty was to protect the citizens of Alamos. After a long ride he had overtaken his man. He hated to admit it, but he had found the town marshal taking refuge behind a woman's skirts. Though, he added, Anita Spaden seldom wore skirts.

Spaden smiled thinly. He reminded the gathered citizens of Alamos that today they had all witnessed the return of the

peace officer who had taken a solemn oath to maintain law and order. They had seen Moss Reynolds ride boldly into town on a buckskin horse that belonged, as they all knew, to Anita Spaden.

"The Santa Anita ranch," said the gambler, "is the one place where Buck Jimson would hesitate to follow the man he boasted he was going to run out of the country. The Santa Anita ranch is owned by a lady. And even tough cowboys like Buck Jimson and his men respect womanhood. So it would seem that our Town Marshal of Alamos, when he ran away, was far-sighted enough to choose a safe refuge from danger.

Moss fought down his hot temper. His eyes were glassy, his grin stiff-lipped. When the gambler sat down, Moss got onto his long legs.

"I'm not makin' ary speech," he told them. "This ain't the time or place for a ruckus, either. And I don't give a damn whether or not I keep this tin badge. But I'm not turnin' it in till I git done usin' it. Git that straight.

"Judge Barbee and Black Jack Spaden know what I've bin doin' for the past week. And it's got the fear in 'em."

Moss Reynolds took a small tally book from his pocket. He opened it with a mirthless grin.

"There's a list of brands here. Texas brands. A lot of 'em. Them brands is on cattle that was stolen in Texas or along the cattle trail here from Texas. They was stolen by Buck Jimson and put in his J road iron, then sold to the Alamos Cattle Company. Barbee and Spaden knew they were buyin' stolen cattle. Judge Barbee and Black Jack Spaden are just as guilty of cattle rustlin' as that Buck Jimson cow thief. They'd like to wean me away from this law badge before I use it to send 'em to the penitentiary at Yuma. So I've bin spendin' the past week gatherin' this list of brands and tallyin' stolen cattle. Barbee and Spaden both know it. . . . Take 'er easy, Judge. Spaden, you move to'rds your gun and I'll gut-shoot yuh!

"I didn't know Buck Jimson was goin' to show up here, or I might have waited. But I sighted a trail herd about twenty miles on the yonder side of the river, headed this way. That'll be another trail herd in Buck Jimson's J iron. He must have stole that herd along the trail, in New Mexico. He rode into town with a few of his tough hands to wipe me out. But I was gone.

"It's goin' to be somebody's tough luck when Buck Jimson rides into Alamos to collect the money for them stolen cattle that he's deliverin' now to the Alamos Cattle Company. Because this time when Buck Jimson comes, as he claims he come before, huntin' for me, I won't be hard to find. I'll be here at Alamos waitin' for him. And I'll be wearin' this law badge!"

MOSS REYNOLDS stood there facing them, his long legs spread, his thumbs hooked in his belt.

"Now," he drawled his challenge, his eyes fixed on Black Jack Spaden, "does anybody here want to try takin' this town marshal star off my shirt?"

Little Doc Steel was on his feet. His brown eyes were bright and twinkling.

"Citizens of Alamos," he said, his voice strong, "I move that Moss Reynolds remains town marshal, and that this indignation meeting be adjourned."

"That goes double, Doc!" wheezed Mac. "Damn it, didn't I tell you Moss Reynolds would throw their lies back in their faces? This costs me nothin' but a two-bit bar-dog job, Moss. Kin you use a pot-bellied deputy?"

Mac was still wearing his liquor spotted bar apron. He yanked it off and threw it towards Spaden.

"Take it easy, Mac," smiled the gambler. "I'm doubling your pay. And I'm glad to stand up and tell you all that I was wrong about Moss Reynolds. By all

means let him remain town marshal. I'm certain that Judge Barbee will agree."

"Certainly, suh! Most certainly. Even though Moss Reynolds seems to be somewhat in error regarding the legality of the cattle dealings the Alamos Cattle Company have had with Buck Jimson."

Spaden made his customary gesture of inviting the citizens of Alamos across the street for drinks on the house.

"Deal me out," said Moss Reynolds. His eyes were hard and cold.

Mac hung back. Moss told the beefy bartender to put on his apron and hold down his job. And to keep sober.

"I've got a notion, Mac, that Buck Jimson and his outfit will show up before daybreak."

Doc Steel stayed behind with Moss. The little doctor said that he had a bottle of bonded stuff in his office, next door to the barber shop.

Inside the office, over their drinks, Doc Steel and Moss Reynolds talked.

"I never for a minute thought you'd run away, Moss," said Doc Steel. "I pretended to believe what Jack Spaden wanted me to think."

"Spaden," nodded Moss, "and Barbee."

"Judge Barbee," said Doc, "is scared. Badly scared. For all his stiff-backed bluffing, he's deathly afraid of Jack Spaden. Only his pride keeps him from quitting Alamos, leaving everything he owns behind. Pride holds him here. Pride and the desperate sort of hope that he will be able to avenge the murder of his son.

"Don't judge the old boy too harshly, Moss. If he's mixed up in cattle rustling, it's through ignorance or fear of Jack Spaden. His son Ward was no cattle rustler. He was killed because he found out about the Rail R stolen trail herd that cost your father his life."

Moss listened while Doc Steel talked. And from little Doc Moss got a new slant on Black Jack Spaden.

"Buck Jimson," said Doc Steel, "is the man who cracks the whip. "Van Carter was Buck Jimson's right hand bower. Together they dictated their terms. Black Jack Spaden is fast with a gun. But Buck Jimson and Van Carter and Jimson's crew of renegade cowhands outnumbered the gambler. His only bet was to settle on their terms, buy their stolen cattle.

"When you killed Van Carter, Moss, Jack Spaden figured he'd found the right man to clean out Buck Jimson and his tough outfit. Perhaps he really thought you did run away from Buck Jimson."

Moss grinned. "Where does Anita Spaden fit into the picture?"

"Jack Spaden is in love with her. So was Ward Barbee. So, in his own ugly way, was Van Carter. Last but by no means least, the swashbuckling Buck Jimson can be classed among the men who want Anita Spaden. And unless I'm losing my eyesight, Moss Reynolds is in the running. If I were younger . . . ."

They heard the sound of men on horseback. Doc blew out the light.

Moss opened the door, then shoved his gun back into its holster and stepped out onto the wide plank sidewalk. Just as Anita Spaden and her Mexicans pulled up in front of the Lone Star.

Anita told her Mexicans to go in and have their drinks. She rode over to where Moss and Doc Steel were standing.

"Buck Jimson and his men are coming to kill you, Moss!"

She swung down and gave little Doc Steel a hug and kiss, then spoke to Moss in her throaty voice.

"Buck Jimson is delivering another trail herd. And he's half drunk and on the prod, bragging that he's killing you on sight. So I brought Chico and the others along to even the odds. They're Mexicans but they'll fight. There's not a man among 'em with any part of a yellow streak. And they hate Buck Jimson and his crew! You won't be playing it alone."

"Then keep Chico and his men out of the Lone Star," Moss told her. "Hide 'em out. And I want you to stay with Doc. Doc, kin you keep her outa this ruckus, or do I have to lock her up?"

Anita's arm was around little Doc's shoulders.

"My father was murdered in the Lone Star. You don't deal me out at the showdown."

"You'll keep out of it." Moss Reynolds looked grim now. "This is my game. Keep your Mexicans over on the right side of the street. Stay here with Doc. Otherwise you stand a good chance of gettin' the Town Marshal of Alamos killed before he starts. Promise!

"I know who killed your father and mine. And Ward Barbee. I'm givin' him the same shot at me. And I'm playin' it lone-handed!"

CHAPTER SIX

Back to the Wall!

CHICO and his Mexicans rode out of town with Anita Spaden. Anita had talked only a minute to Black Jack Spaden in front of the Lone Star when he came outside to see what she and her vaqueros were doing in town.

"Chico and his men just finished a little round-up. They rode to town to celebrate. I came along to pay 'em."

"Take your damn' greasers and get out of town right now!" Jack Spaden's voice was ugly. "They don't get a drink in my place. Get 'em out of town. And you go with 'em. Stay clear of Alamos. Buck Jimson and his outfit are due here any time. Buck Jimson is bad news."

"Your new marshal will draw the fangs of that rattlesnake."

"That's your opinion," said the gambler flatly. "It's shared by a simple-minded country doctor and a whiskey-soaked bartender. But by nobody else. Buck Jimson holds all the aces."

"Not the ace of hearts," said Anita. "Even when Black Jack Spaden is dealing 'em from the bottom of his marked deck."

"I'll make a deal with you, Anita. Quit stalling and marry me. And Moss Reynolds fills his hand tonight."

"Moss Reynolds wouldn't want it that way," Anita told the gambler. "Neither would I."

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She leaned from her saddle, holding out her hand. "Adios, Jack." Her voice was a whisper. *"Hasta luego."*

Black Jack Spaden took her hand. He pulled her part way from her saddle and kissed her. Her lips were cold and stiff.

"Adiosita. Hasta la vista!"

His white teeth were bared and his yellow eyes shone like an animal's in the shadowy darkness. The smoke from the black paper cigarette in his slim-fingered hand smelled faintly of the marijuana the gambler had mixed with his tobacco.

"Andale, muchachos!" Anita Spaden called to her Mexican vaqueros. "Let's go, boys!"

Black Jack Spaden watched them ride away. Then he went back into the saloon.

Nobody noticed the Mexicans who rode back to town one at a time, coming from different directions and keeping to the shadows. Sitting their horses in the darkness behind the buildings on the right side of the street.

Anita left her horse and came into Doc Steel's unlighted office by the back door, a carbine in the crook of her arm.

"Where is Moss?" she asked Doc who sat in the darkness by the front window.

"Gone," said Doc Steel. "I don't know where. Sit down and keep quiet."

"He said he knew who killed my father and his father and Ward Barbee."

"I heard him," said Doc Steel grimly. "Quiet, girl. There they come—Buck Jimson and his renegades!"

They came down the street in a big swirling cloud of dust, half a dozen riders, spurring their horses to a run, yelling like drunken Indians. Their six-shooters were spitting jets of flame. Tall, lean, riding with his weight in his left stirrup, a six-shooter in his hand, Jimson rode in the lead.

"Where's that coyote Moss Reynolds? Where's that town marshal of Alamos that's makin' a Winchester cut on my trail herd? Alamos is yourn!"

Word had spread through the town an hour ago that somebody had seen Moss Reynolds ride out of town alone. In the darkened little bar at the hotel Judge Barbee, the store keeper, a handful of citizens who lived on the right side of the street, crouched in the darkness and silently cursed Moss Reynolds for a yellow-bellied coward.

Inside the lamp-lit Lone Star Saloon the betting was that the marshal had coyoted on them again, in spite of his war talk. The barn man said Moss had saddled his buckskin horse and pulled out.

Now a lone rider on a big line-backed buckskin horse rode through the dust cloud kicked up by Buck Jimson and his renegade cattle rustlers. They were bunched and milling around, whirling their horses, yelling and shooting in front of the Lone Star.

"Where the hell is the town marshal of Alamos?" Buck Jimson's drunken voice wailed like a wolf howl.

"Right here, Jimson!"

★

MOSS jumped the big buckskin horse through the half dozen men on horseback, spurred the line-backed dun into Buck Jimson's horse with a snorting lunge that locked their stirrups. Moss tackled the trail boss around the neck, quitting his saddle, dragging Jimson off his horse and down onto the ground.

As the big buckskin horse whirled and stampeded down the wide street, Moss's voice sounded hard and loud and clear from the heavy dust cloud: "Wipe 'em out, Chico! Git 'em, *hombrecitos!*"

Chico and his Mexicans rode out of the black shadows behind the builings, their guns spitting. Moss and Buck Jimson rolled over in the heavy dust around the Lone Star hitchrack.

Moss knocked the six-shooter from

Jimson's hand. Then Jimson was clawing at his face, gouging at his eyes. Moss jerked his head sideways and down and his teeth sank deep into the tough trail boss's shoulder. Then he got an arm free and his fist smashed into Jimson's face with short, terrific punches.

Suddenly Jimson's renegades broke and ran for it. Chico and his Mexicans charged after them, shooting them out of their saddles.

Buck Jimson was sobbing, his face battered to a pulp, the fight beaten out of him.

Inside the saloon the beefy Mac tried to remember exactly what Moss had told him before he rode out of town an hour ago. His red face was grayish and mottled. He was no fighting man, and the whiskey had died in him. He had to take a long quick drink to steady his hands.

There were about a dozen men in the saloon besides Black Jack Spaden and the two husky deputies.

Spaden gave his two cappers their orders and slid his white handled six-shooter from its shoulder holster.

The customers were edging towards the rear door. The fighting outside had them panicky. Now and then a stray bullet smashed through the front windows and whined to a thudding stop against the far wall.

A shot smashed glasses on the back bar and splintered the frosted mirror. Mac ducked low and the match flame in his hand lit a lamp on the floor behind the bar.

The fighting outside, a running fight now, was fading in the distance. Black Jack Spaden took a last long drag at his cigarette. Outside in the darkness Moss Reynolds stood up and yanked the beaten Buck Jimson to his feet. His six-shooter poked the trail boss in the back.

Both men were covered from head to foot with yellow dust. Their faces were masked by blood. Because of the dirt and blood that covered their faces and clothes they were as alike as two men could be.

"You murdered two good men the last time you fetched a trail herd to Alamos, Jimson. The night I got shot. The night I killed your pardner Van Carter." Moss Reynolds' voice was low-toned, ugly. "You're under arrest for cattle rustlin' and murder. Try to rabbit and I'll bust your spine with a bullet. Walk into the Lone Star and see how much help you git from your boss Black Jack Spaden. Git in there!"

The long barrel of Moss Reynolds' six-shooter poked Buck Jimson in the back. The big trail boss was staggering like a drunken man as he went through the swinging half-doors of the Lone Star Saloon.

"Stand your hand, Spaden!" barked Moss, right behind Jimson.

Then it happened in split seconds. The lights were shot out. A .45 slug struck Buck Jimson in the face.

Moss, crouched low behind Jimson, felt the whine of the bullet. Buck Jimson swayed on his bending legs and went down.

From behind the bar Mac lifted a lamp with the wick turned up so high the flame threatened to explode the chimney.

By its sudden glare Moss saw Black Jack Spaden crouched behind the overturned poker table. His six-shooter spewed fire. Spaden's first bullet clipped Moss's ear. The next bullet ripped his shoulder muscle. Then Spaden was lying in a crumpled heap and Moss Reynolds emptied his gun at him.

"For Sam Reynolds! For Mike Spaden! For Ward Barbee! For the town marshal of Alamos!"

The twin barrels of Mac's sawed-off shotgun covered the two cappers who had dropped their guns and stood now with their arms held high.

"Hogtie 'em, Mac."

Moss Reynolds' eyes were slits of green

glass in a mask of dirt and blood. His white teeth bared in a ghastly grin.

Anita Spaden came in through the swinging doors with a rush, a six-shooter in her hand.

"It was Black Jack Spaden," said Moss. "He didn't have to cheat at cards to win from drunken cowboys. He never lied, except about the killings he'd done."

Doc Steel came into the saloon, carrying his black leather bag. Then Judge Barbee entered, gun in hand.

"That night we met Jack Spaden, Anita," said Moss, "near your brandin' corrals, I got a good look at his eyes. It was moonlight. Those yellow eyes of his shone like a cougar's. I suspected then. And when I talked to Doc and we looked it up in some medical books, that proved it. Black Jack Spaden could see in the dark. His yellow eyes could see where the eyes of other men would be blind in the dark."

"Jack Spaden's eyes were abnormal," said Doc Steel. "In the dark he could distinguish the outline and shape of things that the normal eye could not see."

"Three men had bin killed after the lights had bin shot out," said Moss. "Spaden's two hombres would shoot out the lights. He'd do the killin' and have his gun reloaded by the time he told Mac to light the spare lamp he kept behind the bar.

"Spaden mistaken Buck Jimson for me tonight. Mac had the extra lamp lit and hidden under the bar. When he turned it up high, the light kinda blinded Spaden. And the gun-fight between him and me was even."

"Spaden killed your son Ward, Judge," said Doc Steel, "because Ward was honest and had found out Buck Jimson was peddling stolen cattle to the Alamos Cattle Company and Spaden was reaping the big money."

"And not because Ward was going to marry me, Judge," said Anita. "Ward Barbee was never anything but a big brother to me. But he'd told Jack Spaden, after he found out Jack was mixed up with Van Carter and Buck Jimson in the cattle rustling, that he'd kill Jack if Jack ever tried to crowd me, by any means, into marrying him."

"I'm sorry, Anita," said Judge Barbee. "I blamed you for playing fast and loose with both Ward and Jack Spaden. Forgive an old man who only loved his son."

"That's easy, Judge," she told him, smiling.

It was hard for Anita to believe that Black Jack Spaden had killed her father.

"Mike Spaden," said Moss, "found out that the tinhorn was buyin' stolen cattle. He had to be killed to shut him up. Doc says your father was goin' to send Black Jack Spaden to spend some time at the pen at Yuma."

★

DOC STEEL had suspected the man who claimed to be a square gambler and a man always boasted he never lied.

"But until Moss Reynolds showed up," said Doc who had been bandaging Moss' bullet-ripped shoulder, "there wasn't a man tough enough or honest enough to beat Black Jack Spaden at his own game, with his own kind of cards."

Moss told Mac to untie the two badly scared cappers. He told them to saddle their horses and quit the country before he had time to change his mind and have them sent to Yuma prison.

Chico and his Mexicans rode back down the street. Chico was leading Moss' buckskin horse. The Alamos boothill was going to get some new graves. No Mexican had been killed.

"The Lone Star Saloon is yours, Mac," said Moss Reynolds. "You earned it. It'll cost you a son-of-a-gun in a sack."

Chino, the Curly One, was singing as they came riding down the wide dusty street of Alamos in the moonlight:

"That Pelirrojo is a fighting cock
With red feathers, and red blood on his silver mounted spurs.
He has brought the law and peace to Alamos
And now there will be a grand fiesta.
I have talked to some of the bright stars
And to the round moon that sees much and says things to me
So I will pass on the secret which he tells me:
This will be a grand wedding fiesta.
And I think that Pelirrojo will make a very fine husband
For the beautiful Señorita Anita who is our Patrón."

Moss Reynolds grinned and reached for Anita's hand as she helped little Doc Steel fasten the bandage into place on his shoulder. Their eyes met. Anita smiled and nodded, her face flushed.

Mac was setting out glasses and bottles. Judge Barbee filled his glass. His eyes were shining.

There was that trail herd to gather and hold for the owners of the stolen cattle. Chico and his Mexicans would return after they had finished that work. Judge Barbee was telling Mac that Moss Reynolds was now the real owner of the Alamos Cattle Company.

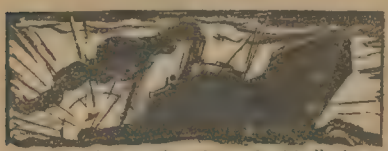
"Miss Anita," the Judge put a glass of sherry in her hand. "Gentlemen—a toast!"

He stood ramrod straight and addressed the citizens of the town who were now gathered to the last man in the Lone Star Saloon.

"We drink the health and happiness of the town marshal of Alamos who had, by his honesty and bravery, brought law and order at last to the trail-town that has been called tougher than a boot. Gentlemen, to Moss Reynolds and his future bride!"

The marshal of Alamos grinned, and this time there was no anger in the kiss he bestowed upon Anita Spaden, whose eyes were as bright and filled with promise as Chino's stars.

THE END



Blood began to pour from Ramos' lacerated wrists and slowly the muzzle of the great rifle swung away from the control tower of the locks. "They'll give you a medal for what you've done, buddy," the guard said. "And you did it for the Americans, didn't you?"

"Sure," Ramos said, smiling through the pain. "I found somebody I hate worse. I guess I don't hate them any more at all. I'll fight for the Americans any time."

"WARDEN OF THE ZONE"

—a gripping novelette by Jock Cunningham—takes you to the shores of Panama's big ditch, the most heavily patrolled spot in the world today, to watch our Army engineers install the big guns at Miraflores.

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Adventure 15c

★ ★ SILVER TRENT

"Have Trent's Hawks sunk so low that we have to rustle the steers of half a dozen busted little shoe-string ranchers?" Jim Clane asked his chief, the grim-eyed Robin Hood of the Rio. But the fierce pride that rode Silver Trent kept him resolved to carry out his recklessly daring scheme to liberate those struggling cowmen—though it damn him forever in the eyes of the men who followed him to hell!

CHAPTER ONE

Quitter's Legacy

PABLO'S gun-hand flicked like a striking copperhead, without warning.

Silver Trent checked the coffee cup before his lips long enough to murmur, "Easy, old one," and then drank.

The man who had come up toward the

RIDES ALONE ★ ★

Smashing Novel of the Rio Robin Hood

By Stone Cody

Silver raced toward the head, his six-gun hammering. . . .

fire had frozen at the view of Pablo's gun-muzzle. Now, hearing what Silver said, he relaxed tentatively, though his face showed queerly white in the ruddy fire-glow and the flickering light revealed beads of sweat on his upper lip.

Pablo snarled, "Take off your hat, double-crosser!"

The man took off his hat hastily.

Silver looked at him with eyes that held a wicked amusement, putting down the coffee cup and reaching into his pocket for the sack of tobacco and corn-husk papers.

The man before him ran a dry tongue over dry lips, then he opened his mouth to speak.

"Shot your mout' ", Pablo snarled at

him. "When *El Jefe* talks to you, then you answer."

The man shut his mouth, and the irredescent beads of sweat were visible on his forehead, now that his hat was off.

Silver Trent laughed a little, silently. "Well, Fenner?" He asked, licking the rolled cigarette. "What's on your mind?"

Slug Fenner swallowed, his eyes running hastily from face to face about the fire and then rushing back to Silver's as though stampeding there for some kind of protection.

"Look, Silver," he said hastily, "I know what I done an' what you must think of me. I—I don't understand it myself. Nothin' like that ever come over me before—turnin' yeller, I mean. Hell! I owed you everythin'. I was one of the gang—"

Pablo growled in his throat like a suddenly affronted catamount and shoved his gun back into its holster. For the split fraction of a second, Fenner's startled eyes looked relieved, then they froze again as the glittering blade of the knife flowed into Pablo's hand.

"You were not ever of this gang," the Mexican said softly. "Remember that, *hijo del perro grande*. Remember that, and never say again that you were."

Fenner flushed, his jaw jutting out suddenly. "All right," he snapped. "Have it your way." His eyes turned to Trent, "But you know what I mean, Silver." His voice had a hint of appeal in it, but a sudden new defiance was in it also.

Trent looked at him thoughtfully.

This man was one of Silver Trent's two failures. From time to time, Fate threw some new bit of human flotsam into his reach and, rarely, the man turned out to be worth having. When that was so, Trent offered him a chance to run with his famous Hawks. The man who refused that offer was rare. But the man who accepted and then betrayed it was rarer still.

Of the latter there had been one Grulla Ferguson and now—this one.

Trent's hard eyes ran over the face before him, trying to search out the concealed weakness that had made his initial judgment wrong. It wasn't, at first glance, either a bad face or weak one, despite the natural nervousness that strained it now. The eyes were a trifle too close-set against the strong jut of the nose, but then one of the bravest and most loyal men Trent had ever known had had eyes even closer set than that. The mouth was firm, handsome—maybe a little too handsome?—and the jaw was strong.

"Sit down, Slug," he said evenly.

Fenner sat down a little too quickly, as though his knees had not been too steady, and looked relieved.

"I take it you didn't come back to try to join up again," Trent observed, his voice dry.

Jim Clane, who had brought him, said impatiently, "Look, Silver—why palaver? Ricardo damn near died because of this skunk. Let's take him out an' string him up and get it over for him."

Lars Johanssen grunted. "Ya! Dat's right, Chief. I am not killer, like you know. But I tak' d'is neck in my han—an' after, I sleep gude."

Ricardo cut in quickly. "It is not for me," he said quietly in Spanish. "What he did to me is nothing—*denada*. But for all of us, I think he knows perhaps too much. And besides, in the future, men should know that one does not quit *Los Halcones*—nor betray them. . . ."

Silver's eyes narrowed and he said, drily, "It's a point, but then. . . . What was on your mind, Fenner?"

Fenner caught his breath a little sharply, started to speak and then tautened. It was as if a sudden idea of his own had forced him against his will to speak.

"Listen," he said, his eyes hard, unyielding. "If any of these hard boys think

they want trouble with me, they can have it. I joined up in good faith, an' I ain't sitting around takin' everything any gent thinks he wants to deal out."

Jim Clane's eyes lighted up, and automatically his hands went to his guns. "That's me," he snarled. "I want trouble with you, you crawlin' skunk. Plenty of it!"

Silver cut off Jim's growl with a raised hand. "We won't get anywhere this way," he said. "Go ahead, Fenner; say your piece."

"All right," Fenner said, a little breathlessly. "I got somethin' that's good for me an' that's good for you. See? I don't say I did right when I was with you, an' at the same time, I don't say that I ever discovered any reason to believe this Robin Hood business that folks talk about you. I'm figurin' that you're lookin' out for your own end, same as anybody else. An' I got somethin' for your end —anywhere's from twenty to thirty thousand dollars, *oro*—gold." You interested, or do I take my crack at these buckaroos of your'n that think they're so good with their guns, an' then take my leave?"

Silver said, "You've talked a lot of words. What have you really got to tell?"

"Two to three thousand head of rustled cows," Fenner snapped. "You'rn for the takin'!"

★

HE LEANED forward tensely. "Now listen. When I funked out with you here, I knowed it wasn't no use to come back an' try to explain it so, I sloped an' I ended up in a Texas town, name of Ocotilla. There's a hombre there that's beginnin' to run the place an' he offers me a job as marshal, helpin' him. I'm broke, so I take it.

"My boss—name's Corbin, J. G. Corbin—is figgerin' to take over the town an' the range. The town ain't run right an' the range is broke up amongst a lot of two-bit ranchers and homesteaders that are liable any minute to start ploughin' up the sod an' runnin' good cattle graze. You know how it is with the little fellers they can't make a livin' on cattle alone, an' they aim to do it however they can, an' to hell with what comes afterwards. So what Corbin's doin' is all right with me."

He paused and stared earnestly at Silver. "Only," he said with emphasis, "there's one other pretty big rancher there. Name of Kilvane, who owns the K&K brand. He's all right. An', well—well, I aim to marry his daughter Anne. Get it? I got to keep Corbin from ruinin' him. They're fightin' now over water, an' that means life or death to Kilvane. If I had a crowd up there that'd bluff Corbin off—make him know he couldn't tackle the K&K without gettin' the worst of it—why, that wouldn't do me any harm with Anne, or with old Rusty Kilvane. See? An' I could still get along with J.G. Corbin. Get it?"

"I think I catch it," Silver said thoughtfully. "You just want to show this Corbin that you can call up plenty of strength any time you want to. That'll make your hand about strong enough to play it even between Kilvane an' Corbin. An' you'll be hog-tyin' the gal an' the K&K by the same maneuver."

Fenner pulled in a deep breath and let it out softly. "You got it," he said.

"But then, what'll happen when we pull out?"

"They won't know you can't be called back. In fact, they'll figure that if I did it once, why not again? That's what I'll play on. Rather than take the chance, J.G. 'll play along with me."

"Besides, in the meantime," Silver observed shrewdly, "you can begin buildin' up a crew of gun-fighters of your own.

"You got it."

Silver laughed shortly. "All right for

you," he said, hard-eyed. "But where do we come in? You already said that we weren't any Robin Hoods—an' you sure were right. I don't mind helpin' out a poor hombre when he needs it, especially if we can make a little profit out of it for our trouble. It's good business. It makes us friends, hideouts, gets us information we need. But this is different. It's out of our territory. What do we get out of it, feller?"

Fenner leaned forward with his jaw jutting and something like triumph in his eyes. "Corbin's been rustlin' cattle," he said softly, "to break the little guys, one by one. He's been goin' at it strong, an' hasn't tried to market a single head of that stolen beef. It's all been run up into the hills for brand blottin', an' it'll be held there in the best hideout you ever saw until he gets ready to claim it or sell it. There's two to three thousand head of it not far from the Border. An'—I—know—where—it—is!"

Silver's lower lip jutted. "You mean that's our cut," he said grimly. "How much of this beef is guarded?"

"Hell," Fenner said contemptuously. "He don't keep only three men up there. You can take it without gettin' sweat on a horse."

"An' what'll Corbin think of you for that?"

Fenner grunted. "He'll think he don't want you back again, is all. An' he'll think he better play square with me, an' not monkey around."

Trent pushed his sombrero back with a quick restless hand, so that the firelight showed on the one lick of white hair which ran back from his forehead and had given him the name Silver. His white teeth showed in an even grin.

"Might be a deal," he said with sudden cheerfulness, "if it's like you tell it. How about this Kilvane—he as crooked as you an' Corbin?"

Fenner spat contemptuously. "He's so dumb he'll play it straight, even when it's cuttin' his own throat!"

"An' the gal? Same weakness?"

Fenner looked complacent. "Leave her to me," he said. "I'll take care of her."

Trent nodded. "All right. Get on back. We'll ride on in, gettin' there in a couple of days to look things over. It sounds like it might be worth tryin'."

★

FENNER stood up with his eyes blazing with triumph. "You won't regret it," he said jubilantly. "It'll be one of the best couple of day's work you ever did!"

He stood up and swept his eyes arrogantly around the circle. "If the rest of you birds had as much brains as Silver," he announced, "you'd get farther. Before you get through spending your cut of thirty thousand dollars, you won't be so sorry you had me in the gang once."

Pablo's breath came suddenly short and fast. *"Jéfe,"* he begged almost pitifully, "I do not ask much. Let me only cut the throat of this one before he walks off leaving me with a sickness in the belly for ever!"

Silver eyed him coldly. "You had ears to hear what I said," he murmured, hard-jawed. "Did you, then, not hear?"

Pablo subsided with something like a groan.

The others said nothing. Only Ricardo spat, the scornful spurt from his lips sizzling with sudden loudness in the fire.

Slug Fenner laughed and turned on his heel, striding through the darkness toward his horse, *"Adios, hombres,"* he called over his shoulder. *"Hasta la vista."*

Jim Clane's square face purpled until it looked black in the fire light. "Yeah, until we see each other again!" he snarled.

The bitter brightness of his eyes followed the retreating figure through the darkness, then he swung on Silver. "I don't know what's come over you," he

raged. "Have we got so that we got to take the beef of a few busted ranchers for our own? Is that the kind of outfit Trent's Hawks have turned out to be? Because if it is—"

Trent's cold voice cut him off, his rocky, homely face suddenly bereft of all friendliness. "I'm not sure what's come over you, Jim. Tryin' to run the outfit now?"

Jim Clane swallowed, his hands sinking almost imperceptibly toward his guns and then relaxed in a gesture of indescribable frustration. Suddenly, he flung away, following Fenner's retreating figure into the darkness.

Trent's eyes followed him with something almost like pity, then returned to the stony-faced circle about the fire. His grin was thin, angry.

"To look at you," he taunted them, "anybody would think we were a lot of priests engaged in profanin' the altar. Did it ever occur to you that we're outlaws, —the dodge—with a livin' to make? An' we can't afford to be too particular? Or maybe you better all start in takin' the vows."

Nobody spoke. Only Pablo moved. He whetted his knife on his thumb with sudden violence so that the blood spurted as the keen edge caught and slid in deeply.

"Are we so saintly," Trent asked grinning relentlessly, "that we can't check a crook in his crookedness so we can lift his loot from him—even if you don't happen to like the man that made us the proposition?" His voice hardened. "What shall it be? Your war or mine? Your truth or my truth?"

Nobody said anything. Pablo's face, lean-burning in the firelight, turned down toward the espurting blood on his thumb.

Ricardo's young, hawklike face showed hooded eyes.

The mesquite root fire crackled and snapped, loud against the utter silence. And overhead the black parchment of the sky showed its immense sidereal illuminations, remote and brilliant and unreadable to mortal eyes—as though its bright page were meant only to throw back to man's ancient affirmations the old, derisive answer: "What is Truth?"

CHAPTER TWO

A Drink with C. G. Corbin

TRUTH for Trent, three evenings later, was the main street of Ocotilla with the violent colors in the western sky fading and the dusk coming down. The stores that had already lighted up showed faint pallid yellow streaks across the dust of the road, like bleached spots against the yellow afterglow. And there was that in the air, in the sharp eyes of men, and in the over-quietness and casualness of their gesture, that put a

humming along Trent's spine as unmistakable as the first light rasp of catgut across fiddle strings.

But there was nothing tangible to take hold of.

At Silver's side, Magpie Myers' wrinkled face was expressionless, his faded, pale-bright eyes very alert.

"This is wrong, Silver," he murmured out of the side of the mouth.

"Feel it, too, do you?"

Silver's gray eyes wandered with seeming idleness over the street and fixed suddenly on a girl who stood on the porch of the general store. She was slender and lithe as a young willow tree, with dark hair and wide eyes which were fixed on Silver in a kind of startled recognition. He knew that he had never seen her before so her expression could mean only one thing—that she guessed his identity, had known of his coming; in fact, Anne Kilvane.

Just beyond her, at the store's hitchrack, was a buckboard. An older man with a white mustache and wrinkled eye-corners was stowing packages into the back of it. His head also was turned toward Silver, his eyes keen and questioning.

Beside Silver, Fenner's figure appeared suddenly, as though out of thin air. "The Busted Eagle Saloon," he said, out of the side of his mouth, and passed on. Silver nodded infinitesimally, but his face hardened still more.

The murky gleam of Fenner's marshal's badge disappeared as he gained the boardwalk and disappeared among the strolling crowd of cowpunchers and townsmen.

The Busted Eagle was only a few doors down. Silver and Magpie, with Lars Johanssen a little behind them, pulled up at the hitchrack and dismounted.

A wide-eyed kid of about ten, in jeans that were too big for him and rolled up around the bottom, pulled up in front of them and stared long at Silver's horse.

"Gee," he said softly. "A *palomino!*"

He looked at Silver earnestly. "It is a palomino, ain't it, mister?" He said with his voice trembling a little. "It is, ain't it?"

"Why, yeah, son," Silver said. "It's a palomino, all right."

"Gee," the kid said, awed. "I never seen one before. I seen some buckskins but I ain't never seen one of them. I—I reckon they ain't many of 'em aroun' these parts. Gee," he said softly, "I reckon you're lucky, mister."

"Well maybe," Silver said. "I got several of 'em. In fact, I got quite a little herd of 'em."

The boy looked at him with a wonder so great that it had a tinge of unbelief in it. "Honest, mister? Gee, there ain't but one other gent that has 'em like that." His eyes took on an unearthly shine. "Silver Trent! He's got a whole remuda of 'em—real ones. That's what they say, anyways, an' I reckon it's true. All perfect—every one of 'em."

His voice rose in an ecstasy of recountal. "The hides of 'em gold as gold, and manes and tails silver as silver. An' not a splotch on 'em, 'cept—'cept mebbe a star on their foreheads, an'—an' mebbe a star the side of their fetlocks. Like—like for wings."

Like a shadow, then, a big man came up out of the alley by the side of the saloon and stood looking on. The sight of him jerked at Silver's attention but did not quite move his eyes. He kept looking at the kid, but in the fringe of his vision he took in the man with something tightening in his stomach.

The man was curiously built, his body giving the impression of cones sunk into one another. His shoulders were wide and his chest was deep, but also his back was deep, so that the whole thing made a section of a sphere. And that section ran down evenly, so that it's circumference was equal at the waist and then this waist

widened into two equal diminishing cylinders that were the legs.

It was an odd sight, like a man built perfectly out of large, pared, solid sausages.

Silver grinned briefly at the kid and said: "This What's-His-Name's has got some luck, all right. Well, I'll see you, bud." He started to turn away.

"This What's-His-Name?" the kid shrilled at him in sudden outrage. "You mean you ain't hear'n of Silver Trent?"

Trent turned back to him. "I've heard the name," he said, smiling a little. "He's an outlaw."

The kid set his small jaw so that it looked like a young, unripe walnut. "Mebbe he is an outlaw, mister," he said, "but he ain't that kind of a outlaw. He's good. He don't never do nobody no harm unless'n they does what's wrong. Why, Silver Trent—he's the Hawk—*El Halcon de las Sierras!* Why, if anybody does you wrong"—his voice broke high and shrill in excitement—"they'll fix it up—"

He broke off and his small body seemed to shrink as though it had been suddenly deflated. "But I reckon not—any more."

"Why not any more, son?"

"Because they're gonna get him," the kid said dully. "You see, they can, if he ain't lookin' for it. If they can trick him and trap him in. I hear'n 'em talkin'. I hear'n big Jay—"

But the huge cylindrical man stepped forward, clearing his throat.

"Good evening, gentlemen. I see you're newcomers to Ocotilla. I'm glad to welcome you. Corbin's my name. I'm nothin' but just another citizen, but we pride ourselves on our hospitality here."

SILVER saw now that he had eyes which were oddly round also and queerly colorless. He also saw the kid shrink like a rabbit freezing at the approach of danger.

Silver ignored the newcomer and turned to the kid. "What's your name, bud?"

The kid gasped and his body trembled a little. "Sh-h-ucks, mister. I—wasn't meanin' nothin'. Well . . . so-long, mister. Mom, she'll be wantin'—"

"Bud!" Trent's voice stopped him as though the snapper of a blacksnake whip had curled round him.

"You ain't afraid, are you? What would Silver Trent think of you?"

The kid stared at him and shivered and then all at once brought himself together. "All right," he said tightly, with his jaw jutted out, "it's him. It's J. G. Corbin. He runs this town—the bully! My mom, she says I got to be nice to that ol'—that ol' swelled-up bullhead!" He looked at the cylindrical man and burst suddenly into tears. "Now I've done it," he said, "My mom said—". His sobs drowned out the rest of it.

Trent's look at the small huddled figure was gentle and puzzled. Then he laughed a little and went forward.

"Bud," he said softly. "Bud, listen to me. You like palominos?" Trent stared down at him.

The kid's eyes came up suddenly, wondering.

"I only ask you, son," Silver went on, "because I got one that you can have. A colt that's a pure strain, with only a couple of flaws—a star on his forehead and a star on his fetlocks. So I reckon he was born for you, since you'd be the only one that would be romancin' about stars that were wings and wouldn't occur in a thousand years. He's gentle an' already saddle broke. An' he'll be yours now, in just a couple of days."

The kid looked at him, dazed, yet somehow believing. "You—you mean it, mister?"

Silver grinned at him suddenly all out. "Why, yeah, I mean it, bud. You've done me a favor, without maybe knowin'

it. An' I try not to forget a favor. You see, son, I'm Silver Trent!"

He didn't stay to watch the breath-caught paralysis of that small figure. He turned to the cylindrical man, caught him by the arm.

"Glad to see you, Corbin," he grinned wickedly, "Come in. Let's have a drink!"

The upper arm underneath his hand was like a reluctant, hardwood log for an instant, then it yielded. Together they walked into the saloon.

★

THAT entrance was like the explosion of a small bomb-shell. There was hardly a man in the place who did not stiffen and catch his breath.

Trent's quick hard gray eyes missed none of that. Nor did Magpie's. The oldster said drily, "Silver, I never did know you to work better. But just the same, amigo, not even God knows it *all*."

Silver laughed outright. "What do you think of that, Corbin?" he asked, shaking the big man by the arm. And then his eyes caught those of the bartender.

The bartender was a large and beefy man who had kept indoors by virtue of his profession. But the pallor he had now could not be blamed wholly on the lack of sunlight. And at this moment his eyes looked like startled raisins in a lump of dough.

"Set 'em up, pardner," Silver grinned at him. "This one's on me."

The bartender stared at him and said, "Y—yessir."

Trent's left hand shot out and grabbed him by the coat-front, yanking him up against the edge of the bar. "And forget about the shotgun," he said softly. "You'd never get a chance to use it."

The bartender put on the pallid semblance of a grin. "Sure—sure," he said faintly, and shot a glance at Corbin, then swallowed and ducked suddenly behind the bar as though looking for glasses.

The room had taken on a deadly silence.

It was broken now by Lars Johanssen's bellowing laughter. "Har! Har!" He roared. "I'm go planty places but now I'm listen to Silver talk to boy like man, an' then talk to man like boy. Tall me," he turned a beaming face on the room, "whan we start fight?"

It had a curious effect. For a moment everybody seemed turned to stone. Even Silver looked momentarily startled, then he laughed too.

"Don't wait, boys. Let's start the party."

His left hand licked up almost carelessly and the knuckles of it took J. G. Corbin just under the lobe of the ear, on the angle of his jaw.

In the far corner the rattler-faced man whipped his hands to his belt and took Silver's slug in the belly before the Colt muzzles had quite cleared leather.

But that was late, and Silver knew that it was because the man with the ivory guns and the weasel mouth had drawn faster. And he knew in that breath of an instant that he had misjudged, that he had picked the less dangerous of the two men and that very likely he himself was deader than a doorknob. And he wished that Ricardo and Pablo had been a little quicker. All this he thought in the split second before Ricardo's gun blasted from the window and the soft, horrid *thuk* of Pablo's knife sounded in Weasel Mouth's throat.

The lamp Pablo had shot out smashed to the floor with the glass tinkling, and almost instantly the lamp over the bar went out. The crash of it under Magpie's gun showed a sudden eerie blue flare in which the bartender popped up with the shotgun in his hands. Magpie shot him once through the forehead and the blue flare died down as though it had been Hell's special light for that man's death.

Immediately after, the only light in the

big room was the light of wildly blasting gun-muzzles.

★

THE AIR bloomed out darkly, sharp and choking with the acrid fumes of gunpowder. There should have been no sound, except the snarling explosions of the Colts and men's deep excited, unwise breathing, or perhaps the panicky scuffle of feet scuttling for safety. But there was another sound, because Lars Johannsen had gone berserk again.

It was a sound of bone smashing against flesh, of skulls cracking together, of fast, gargantuan, pounding feet, of bodies crashing into walls, of the crack of heads against wood, of panicky grunts, wild shots, screams of lead-hit men.

In the darkness those sounds held terror. No man should have been willing to dare random bullet in order to fight with his hands in that pitch-blackness. And the mere fact that someone was doing it, put panic in the atmosphere.

Men gasped, grunted desperately and flung toward the doors. There was the scrape and pound of feet, the gasped curses at the doorways, the sickening smack of gun-barrel through flesh to bone and then Lars Johannsen's barrel-chested bawl, "Who wants some more? Come on, you short-bottomed sons of low-down snakes. I—"

Silver's voice cut the bellow off. "Shut up, Lars. Move out, men. We beat one gun-trap. Let's not bungle into another!"

Silver tumbled out the saloon door, whipped sideways, snapped shots right and left at one imaginary and one real shadow, to cover the exit of his men and them, as they whipped past him, cat-footed swiftly to his horse.

A small figure rose up in front of him. "You—your bridle reins are already over him, Mister Silver," the voice stammered.

Lars and Magpie were lunging to their saddles.

Up-street, a gun blared a crimson and yellow streak in the night, the bullet whining close, splintering a plank of the board walk.

Silver cursed and snarled. "Down! Flat in the dust! And stay there, you bat-eared little fool!"

With the sweep of one hard hand he slapped the kid down into the dirt of the street. Then he swung into the saddle.

Down-street, a Winchester put its thinly wicked crack across the air. The bullet snicked across Silver's belly, whipping a chunk out of his saddle horn.

Silver waved a hand at the others. "They're up the street, both ways," he said crisply. "Get goin' through the alley. Meet me at the south end of town." Afterward he bent down and snarled savagely, "Keep layin' flat, you dumb-headed, swell little quarter-wit—an' maybe sometime you'll own a palomino of your own!"

He swung his mount and slapped in the spurs. The golden horse jumped a yard straight up and hit the street flattened out like a traveling bullet.

Up-street a crouching figure slammed two fast shots at Silver's animal that drove toward him. It was a figure that Silver had seen and was heading for.

The man tried to run across the street, then changed his mind. He ducked back toward the boardwalk and desperately slammed another shot at Silver as he brought the palomino up rearing. The slug howled past his ear. His right hand whipped out and caught the gunman by the vest and shirt, jerking him up against the horse's heaving flank.

Silver heeled the palomino into the shelter of a space between two buildings as lead snapped around him. His right hand still held the struggling man, dragging him. The excited, stomping horse whipped a hoof down onto one of the captive's dragging feet, and the man cried aloud in agony.

"You double-crossin' son," Silver

snarled at him. "You got some reason why I shouldn't put a hot slug through you?"

Fenner whimpered. "I—God, it wa'nt my fault. He got onto me. I swear, Silver, he got onto me an' he forced me into it. He'd of killed me if I hadn't done what he wanted."

"You told him I was comin'."

"He—he'd have tortured and killed me if I hadn't. You don't know him. I didn't know him. I was hopin' for a chance to warn you, but he was watchin'."

"That why you tried to kill me a minute ago, you lyin' skunk?"

"I knowed then it was me or you. Once it went wrong. But only . . . Oh, only if you'd try to understand, that I never meant—"

"Where are these cows you told me about?"

Slug Fenner pulled a long shaken breath. "Out by the bend of Black Creek," he gasped eagerly. "You follow Horseshoe Canyon, an' then branch left about half a mile before High Wash cuts in. You can't miss that trail—the tracks'll be there all along. . . ."

Trent shook him savagely. "If you've lied to me, I'll boil you in oil. And you can tell your pardner, Corbin, that he can find me at the K&K. Me an' Kilvane are runnin' this range from now on!"

He wheeled the palomino about and sent him plunging across the street into the other alley, and then he was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

Hell-bound for the Noose!

THE buckboard was only four miles out when he and his men caught up with it. The rig had pulled up alongside the road before they came up, and when Silver dragged his horse to a rearing halt beside the seat he found himself looking into the muzzles of three guns.

He grinned. "Easy," he said. "You're quick on the draw in these parts."

"Mebbe we have to me," Kilvane told him grimly. "Who are you, and what's on your mind?"

"This," Trent told him swiftly. "Fenner asked me to come here to help you out. And Fenner, with Corbin, tried to double cross me. He missed it. You wasn't in town. Here's what happened."

And he told them the story.

"The point now is," he ended, "that I've sent word to Corbin that he can look for me at your place. I won't be there unless I have to. How many men have you got, and how long can you hold out in case he looks me up there?"

Kilvane sat a long moment in silence while the palomino's dainty hoofs beat a restless tattoo in the soft dust of the road. Then he said drily, "This is a lot of help I didn't ask for."

"And don't need," the other, younger man cut in sharply. He turned up a square-cut hard-jawed face to Silver. "If you're mixed up—even enough to be double-crossed—with Slug Fenner, why, speakin' for me, I can do without you."

Silver looked at him somberly. "Mebbe you're right, friend," he said. "Do you know who I am?"

"Trent, aren't you? Some kind of outlaw."

Silver chuckled. "How'd you know it?"

"A kid told us. I've heard somethin' of you, anyway—not that I believe everythin' I've heard."

"Oh, yes—the kid," Silver said softly. "Who was that kid, anyway?"

The hard voice grated back at him. "Nephew of mine, if you want to know. Name of Duke Benson. Mother owns a small spread hereabouts. Dad's dead. And, mister, I'm lookin' out for him—an' her. Mebbe you mean all right. But don't make any mistakes. Like most kids, this one's a fool for an outlaw, but I'm not. Get it?"

"I get it," Trent said, a little bitterly. "Mebbe you're right. So where do we go from here? You able to take care of Corbin all by yourself?"

The girl hit one clenched fist into the palm of her hand with sudden energy. "No!" she answered and Silver could hear the click of her teeth. "No, he can't!"

The youngster tautened. "Anne," he snapped, "you keep qui—"

"I won't," she cut him off passionately. "Listen, Dan Benson, I told you I'd marry you and I'll go your way, whatever it is and wherever it is. But that doesn't mean that I've got to go with a gag in my mouth. I'll say what I think to the longest day we live!"

She turned on Silver. "Of course, we can't handle Corbin alone! He's got this whole range in his pocket. He's run off one good man after another. He's about to take Polly Benson's spread. That's Duke's mother. And he's about to take Dan Benson's spread, too. Dan knows it, but he's so jealous of Slug Fenner that he doesn't want to admit it to you. I hate Fenner. I loathe him. Corbin made Slug town marshal because he could use him. I knew that, and I tried to play along, because I knew how helpless we were and I had hoped . . . Her voice died down.

Then she resumed almost defiantly, "Well, you're Silver Trent. Will you help us?"

At Silver's side, Magpie grunted sardonically and Jim Clane said in a high mincing voice, "Oh, please help us Mr. Robin Hood!"

Lars Johanssen roared. "Har! Har! T'ank you, Mister Robin. We don't want nothin' but to—"

Trent's furious voice cut across the roar like a whirlwind slicing through a boisterous breeze. "Shut up!"

The sudden violence of his anger set Magpie's jaw to dropping and had Lars looking at him with his china-blue eyes bulging.

Silver addressed the girl with strained politeness, "I am here only for my own profit. That must be clearly understood. I hear that Corbin has rustled a lot of cattle. I am an outlaw, and I can't afford to dole out charity. It happens, unfortunately, that I have surrounded myself with fools and half-wits. That is my hard luck, and I will not bore you with it. I intend to have cattle. It is up to you and your father whether I end by helping you as well as myself."

He swung suddenly on the older man. "What do you say, Kilvane. Do you want to play?"

The oldster grunted. "I'm not in shape to say no, Trent."

"Then how many men have you got to help out?"

"Two hands at the place. They wasn't hired for fightin' men, but I figure they'll stick."

"That's three, including you," Silver said rapidly. "I've got a few more that I can leave you." He swung, blazing eyed on his gang. "Ricardo, Gomez, Stillson, Pablo—" he snapped. "You'll go with Mr. Kilvane—Pablo's in charge, of course. Don't try anything on your own, Pablo. Just keep them busy if they try to raid the ranch. I'll take the smart hombres with me. The ones that think they're fit to run things." He glared savagely at Magpie and Jim Clane and Lars. "Maybe I'll be able to make out with them, and maybe I won't!"

He spun his horse and rode back down the trail. Slowly, a little sullenly, Jim Clane, Magpie and Lars followed him on their horses.

He was half a hundred paces down before the voice came to him. Silver recognized it as the hard voice of Dan Benson: "Okay, Trent. I'll play your way, so there's eight of us instead of seven. But you're a damn fool. Corbin's got the men and he's smart. You'll run yourself into a noose."

Silver called back, *"Bueno, amigo,"* and went on, grinning a little in spite of the anger that still ran in him. . . .

★

THEY had picked up the cattle, and now the lead steers ran into the carcass of a dead donkey and boggled at it, their heads down, swaying excitedly. Then they turned in panic and tried to swing off into the arroyo at the left. Silver cursed wearily and jumped the gaunted palomino to cut them off.

The steers swung back too far and tried to run down the grassy wash that twisted back toward the hills. Behind them, the herd began to pile up, bellowing and indecisive, turning first to one side and then another.

Silver sent the palomino to the other side and headed them off.

But the jam got worse.

Magpie Myers burst out of the canyon, crowding the steers, his horse knocked momentarily off balance and lunging against the canyon side so that Magpie's leg was crushed and scraped.

His blue, exhausted eyes took in the situation at a glance. "Take it easy or they will stampede," he called.

He eased his horse forward, shed his shirt and freed his rope. He made a short loop and tossed it deftly over the lead steer's horns and then he flipped his shirt over the steer's head and eyes, flipping over another loop to hold the cloth firm.

The blinded steer stopped short, bellowed, shook his head and looked about to stampede. Magpie put pressure on the rope, leading him carefully to windward of the dead donkey.

The others followed, snorting, snuffy, but quiet enough.

Far behind, the voice of Lars Johannssen sounded, "Gat alo-ong leetle doogies. . . ."

It sounded fresh and careless and to Trent, who had not slept for three nights, a little irritating.

He said to Magpie, "Nice trick. We'd have had trouble there if it wasn't for you. I sure got plenty to learn about cows."

Magpie grunted and turned back to take his place.

Silver shrugged and let him go. Nobody but Lars had spoken to him unnecessarily after that night on the road when he had lost his temper. Lars had said, shamefacedly, "Hall! Silver. No use gatting soore."

But Magpie and Jim were thoroughly unforgiving.

Silver shook his head. He had looked full at Magpie's face before the oldster turned away, and Magpie was a lot more tired than Silver was. His face looked drawn and exhausted, with the deep lined wrinkles of old age drawn into the hard furrows of exhaustion. But his eyes had been alive and bright with hostility.

That deeply smouldering mutinous attitude was something that Silver could not disregard. He had to deal with it. But at the moment he didn't know how.

He led the herd down to the grassy depression which he had noted beforehand and turned, hard-eyed, toward his men. "Hold them here," he said curtly, and rode off.

The herd was here on Corbin's land. Would Corbin find them before the job was completed? He wondered if he had been underestimating Corbin. Fenner must have told him the whole thing by now. No, on second thought, Fenner wouldn't dare. But Corbin was shrewd enough to have guessed.

He shrugged the questions aside. At any event, the answer would appear shortly.

He turned his horse toward the K&K, putting him at a fast run and following the wooded ridge above the Corbin spread.

It was middle afternoon, with the sun

hammering hot when he hit the K&K Half a mile away he pulled up short and cursed.

Before him, were the smouldering ruins of what had evidently been a ranch house.

The stone chimney still stood and a part of one blackened wall. Behind it, the corral made a black, burned ring like a circle drawn in crayon by a child. To one side the barn was an irregular heap of charred ruins.

Silver drew a long breath, trying to lift the sudden, leaden weight of his heart. This was one time he had badly miscalculated this. He wouldn't have thought that Corbin would have the force, the power. . . . Not with men like Pablo and the others.

A rustle in the brush sent his hand down and up, gun freighted.

"*Aqui estoy yo, Jefe,*" a voice said quietly.

It was Pablo.

Silver looked at him.

"Yes, I know," Pablo said a little wearily, in Spanish. "But there were too many. We lost one man and they three, but still it was too many. It was best to draw away through the arroyo. I am sorry, Jefe, about the ranch house."

Silver said, "One of ours lost?"

Pablo shook his head. "One of the ranch hands," he said grimly.

Silver's jaw muscles tightened. It was an old story—that he should come into a situation and cost some man his life without willing it.

His square-cut homely face turned toward Pablo, questioning. "How many's Corbin got?"

"Maybe thirty, maybe forty," Pablo answered impassively. He looked at Silver as though he were reading the thoughts that whirled through his head. "And a muchacho—a kid they call Duke—told us he's sent for the law—the Rangers."

Silver nodded. "Yeah. . . . Duke. Hell of a name for a kid, ain't it?"

"What do you say, Jefe? And why?"

"Skip it," Silver said.

"Duke," Pablo said slowly. "I do not know thees word."

"It means a hombre that has obligations and damn seldom lives up to 'em," Silver said.

Pablo's face cleared. "*Duque,*" he said. "Yes. The grandees that are not. *Comprendo!*

"To hell with that," Silver said. "Would you like to ride with me? It looks like some of our crowd wouldn't."

FOOTSTEPS sounded, coming through the brush. Silver stiffened a little but Pablo paid no attention.

He looked at Silver. "I have not told you everything," he said, his lean face impassive. "In retreating, it was necessary to leave certain ones behind. The *hacendero* of this—er—*hacienda.* In running, his daughter's horse was shot and she was thrown heavily. He was bullheaded to go after her, but that is what this gringo madman did. He was shot. We could do nothing. Both fell prisoners."

He stopped and his face lost color at the look of Silver's eyes.

After a moment he said: "Silver, I think you are confused because the others wish you to make profit out of your foolishness. For me, *no me gusta*—I do not care for it. . . . But this is nothing—*denada.* Are you a child to quarrel with angry children? Or to look at me so? I am not a coward—this, I think, you have seen."

Silver looked at him. "So? But those I entrusted to you are gone."

Pablo caught his breath.

"I heard that!" a voice said bruskly. "I know enough Mex to get that, all right. An', by God, you've said it! They run out on us, damn it!"

It was Dan Benson, his face suffused with rage, and his left arm in a sling.

Silver's eyes turned on him coldly. "In that case, just how are you here?"

Pablo laughed softly. "He tried, this caballero, but a hit in the shoulder shocks a man. We were able to get him back, but not his companions."

Silver's voice dropped several degrees in temperature. "It looks like you've been lucky, young man," he said. "In your place I wouldn't complain of it—or presume on it. You've been in better fightin' hands than you're likely to be in for a long while."

Pablo's face split into a grin. "You have run into a family quarrel, young man. You are an outsider, so you are the one that gets the brickbats. Let this be a lesson to you."

Silver shook his shoulders impatiently. "Get the others. We're riding."

Pablo put his fingers to his lips and whistled. They rode up fast, leading Pablo's horse.

Silver saw that Gomez had a bandage around his chest. The rest were unmarked. He led them at a steady trot back to the herd.

Pablo laughed shortly at the sight of them. He bent forward, reading brands. Then he greeted Magpie with a grin.

"Well, old one," he jibed, "are you satisfied? It is plain to the eye that you have found all the stolen cattle. Now we will profit, eh?"

"I'll have to see the profit first before I count it," Magpie said bitterly. "I don't see us movin' to the Border with 'em."

Silver laughed at him. "Why, Magpie, these are cows that belong to the ranchers around here. Drive 'em down. We're delivering them."

Magpie glared and Jim Lane cursed.

It was sunset when they hit the flats, and full dusk before Silver, with Dan Benson's help, led the herd to within full sight of Corbin's ranch house.

Silver could just make out a corral full of horses, and figures that seemed to swarm out into the yard as though they had seen him and the herd.

Silver laughed. "Drive 'em to the house," he yelled. "We want to deliver them in style. Make 'em run!"

He whipped the gaunted palomino about and raced him toward the tail of the herd. "Come on, Lars, Jim, Magpie—run 'em straight for the ranch house!" His guns blasted and the herd jumped into life.

Jim Clane howled and his sixgun crashed.

The herd began to mill, changed its mind, burst into a sudden hammering, terrifying run, all in one direction.

Silver hollered exultantly, racing out after them, keeping the flank so that they should not turn.

He had been a cowhand enough to know the bitter disaster of a stampeding herd and the long work afterward, gathering them together—in case you out-lived the tossing, clicking horns and the mad hoofs thundering so blindly. Remembering that, it was strange to *make* a stampede.

And this herd was bellied out now to run straight and blind toward J. G. Corbin's ranch house.

Silver ran the palomino with them, stretched out, keeping the flank of the leading steers running straight. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

"Hell's Hawks for Trent!"

THE dusk was deeper now. He saw lights flash on in the ranch house, and knew, somehow, that men were yelling to each other there. He grinned, with the thunder of the herd in his ears. He was returning this range's stolen cattle, returning them all intact and in a way J. G. Corbin could hardly have expected.

And he wondered whether even this onslaught would overcome odds of five to one. . . .

Then he forgot all that because the herd was trying to split, swerving outward on

each side to miss the bulk of the first outbuilding in front of the main house. And now, above the hammering thunder of the hoofs he heard the crack of guns.

One of the lead steers went down, whipping its body over a broken neck. And steers piled up, bellowing madly, then the ones behind broke over and swerved.

Silver raced toward the head, his sixgun hammering and his voice high-pitched.

But they split at the outbuilding, all right, helped by the hammer of gunfire from the ranch yard, and then swept in a great dividing wave around the place.

Silver pulled up, waited for them to pass and then as the drag steers hammered past in the darkness, he lifted his famous full-throated battle-cry: "To me, *Los Halcones!* Hell's Hawks for Trent."

Even to his own ears the wild familiar call had a sudden overwhelming thrill, as though, listening to it, men's hearts might chill and stop—or start and warm as they never had before.

It lifted high and savage from his own bursting throat and echoed fiercely from the throats of his men. And he thought, if we never ride again, this is good!

He thought that, hammering straight toward the ranch house, knowing that his men were behind him, that they had understood his strategy even before he had started it.

His throat burst again in the old wild yell and crimson gun-flame blossomed from the yard, the bunkhouse and the ranch house. His guns jumped into his hands and responded, seeking out the spurting fire, hammering against his palms in the old remembered way.

And then the ranch house flashed by him, with a gun biting at him viciously as he passed. He pulled the palomino up to a rearing, wild-headed halt and slid from the saddle hitting the ground hard.

His hand swept to his saddle bags and came out with a bottle which he broke sharply against the back porch.

Beyond him, around him, behind him, shots hammered out, and Ricardo's horse pounded by half out of control, with Ricardo's guns slapping the night.

Silver's thumb nail struck a match, tossed it down where the bottle had broken, and the fumes of kerosene lifted.

The flared match made a yellow circle of light around him and the up-flicking blue of the kerosene flames took up from there.

Lead smacked Silver hard in the ribs and sent him whirling to the ground. He lay there an instant with the slugs whipping around him into the dirt, wondering briefly whether it was J. G. Corbin who had gotten that shot in. Yet he knew that it wasn't, because somehow he was certain that Corbin was in the house. Corbin, Kilvane—and Anne Kilvane.

He had needed only sight of Corbin to tell him what he was up against, and what this range was up against; needed only the realization that a gun-trap had been set for him which would have been deadly had he not prepared for it.

Slug Fenner didn't really matter in this because Slug was a yellow weakling, only an agent to get things started. The real man was Corbin. . . .

It seemed to him, vaguely, that the light was getting brighter. He supposed that it must be because the flames were flaring up along the dry wood of the porch. Faintly he heard Ricardo yelling to him.

And then Ricardo took a slug and went down, and the back door of the ranch house opened. A round, sausage-made figure stood there in the crackling flare of the porch fire and grinned down at him. Deliberately then, Corbin lifted a sixgun and put its black muzzle on him.

"You shouldn't have got yourself shot, Trent," the big, rounded figure said to him, grinning wolfishly.

Against Trent's palm an unexpected, unthought of Colt blasted. The sixgun

in Corbin's hands jumped upward, exploded, whipped backward to slam against the boards of the porch.

Trent jumped to his feet, running to get out of the flare of light that targeted him, and pulling up his gun to fire again.

His foot caught on something and he fell flat and hard, the sixgun jumping out of his hand.

Corbin hurled himself forward, landed with his knees in Silver's back against his lungs, driving the breath out of him. He heaved, throwing the weight off.

Corbin fell sideways, caught himself on an elbow and whipped up with his fist slugging for Trent's ear as Trent got to his knees and slugged savagely. The blow slapped Corbin backward.

Silver saw that Corbin was getting to his feet. He struggled up also, thinking that this cylindrical man couldn't get to his feet any more than he, Silver, could.

Corbin stood swaying an instant and then hit Silver square on the mouth. Silver went back two paces and then stuck out his left and danced in, sinking his right into Corbin's stomach.

They came together then, and for the first time a full realization of what was happening came to Silver. He understood that so far sheer luck had helped him escape death at Corbin's hands. And he realized that he, Silver, had miscalculated because he had meant to arrange it so that Kilvane and his daughter could get out of the house safely before the thing burned down. But now he was in the grip of a man who was stronger than any other man he had come to grips with. A man who felt the urgent necessity of killing Silver here and now.

Corbin's big cylindrical arms began to squeeze, and Silver's cracked ribs were a sear of utter agony. He brought his knee up, shoving himself away. Corbin's grip broke and Silver hit him with everything he had and looked for him to go down. But he only staggered back and stooped to scoop up the dropped gun. And then it was that Silver knew he was caught. . . .

IN FRONT and at the other side of the house the hammer of gunfire was still going on, and everything would be all right if he could keep from being killed.

Corbin jerked the gun up and pulled the trigger. Silver held his breath until he realized that the sharp click he heard was the snap of a hammer on an empty shell. In the same instant, he heard a terrified voice yelling, "Put 'em up, Corbin, or I'll drill you."

He stood up and slugged, the blow driving Corbin stumbling backward. And the same treble voice was yelling, "I tell ya, I'll shoot!"

Silver glimpsed a fantastically small figure with a squirrel rifle too big for him at his shoulder, and then something hit Corbin. The big body jerked, sagged and went down.

For a split second he wondered insanely if it could have been the kid. And then Slug Fenner's figure stepped out of the dark edging the firelight.

Fenner stood looking down at the man he had killed. He laughed and said, "He won't run no more ranges."

"Nor you no more double crosses," Magpie Myers said grimly, and shot him.

Silver turned toward the corner of the blazing house from which Magpie had emerged.

"Sometimes, old timer," he said, "you surprise even me."

A small, taut, hysterical figure appeared in front of him. "I'd of shot him, Silver," Duke cried. "I'd have shot him shore, if that other hombre hadn't of."

Silver looked at him and the squirrel rifle which had a ramrod still plugged into the muzzle, but he couldn't smile. Instead he said gently and soberly. "You're a good man, son."

The kid burst suddenly into wild tears, and Silver picked him up and held him close. "Take it easy, old timer," he said.

He became aware all at once that people were around him and that the gunfire had stopped. Jim Clane was there and Pablo and Magpie and Lars and Kilvane and his girl and that hot-headed youngster, Benson, who had his arm around Anne Kilvane.

Silver grinned. He said: "Looks like I've hardly got to know you folks, yet what we was supposed to do was to kind of help you out."

Old man Kilvane stared at him and then laughed unbelievingly. "*Kind* of help us out! Hell, if anybody ever gets helped out better, anywhere, I sure hope to be around to see it. This range is plumb clean!"

Anne Kilvane looked at Silver. "It's not only clean. We—we saw the cows you drove in here. I'm guessin' that they're most of those that have been rustled."

Silver looked at her. "Why, yes, ma'am. I reckon they are. . . . An' returned with the compliments of *Los Halcones.*" He bowed and looked at Jim Clane and Magpie Myers. "Though," he went on, "some of my men kind of think we ought to have taken them for our own profit."

Jim Clane's face grew red in the light of Corbin's blazing house. "You—you're damn right," he choked. "You—"

Silver ignored him. "Instead," he said tranquilly to the girl, "we figure to take Corbin's cattle. That will pay us out pretty good."

Magpie Myers looked at him and suddenly burst out laughing.

Lars Johannseen bellowed, "Jeeminy, he's right. I see them cows. This Corbin, he has yust made his round-up. He is waiting to get through his fighting before he drives to market. Hall! D'ere ain't more than two fallows wit' d'at herd."

Jim Clane looked at Silver and shook his head. "All right," he said, "All right. . . ." Silver grinned at him.

"There are more of them than there were in the rustled herd, Jim," he said, "but you don't care about that. All you really care about is gettin' argumentative."

Jim Clane grinned reluctantly. "What I cared about," he said, "was gettin' rid of that Fenner."

Ricardo, standing to one side, flashed his teeth. "For me," he said. "Yes. But that wasn't so much. But then, Jim, you forget. Silver wasn't fooled. No, I think not from the first minute."

Jim looked suddenly shame-faced. "Sure," he said. "Sure."

Silver suddenly put Duke Benson down to the ground. "Stand on your own feet," he hollered at him. "Ain't you a man?"

Duke looked startled. "Why—why, I guess not yet." Then he grinned suddenly. "You ain't scarin' me, Silver. . . . Much," he added, pulling in his breath.

"You wait," Silver growled at him. "Your maw and your spread are safe now, an' in less than a week it'll have a palomino pony on it. You wait. He'll be steppin' dainty wherever an' whenever you want him to go."

The kid breathed deep and his eyes were round. "Gee," he said softly, "That's swell. Havin' that, an' me havin' heard it. Gee, I reckon nothin' that big'll ever happen to me again."

Silver looked at him, puzzled. "Heard what."

Duke looked at him almost scornfully. "Why the yell," he said, as though he couldn't believe anybody was that dumb. "Ev'ybody talks about it, but there ain't many, I bet that's really *heard* it. But *I* heard it!" He put back his head suddenly with his eyes shining, in another world. "To me, *Los Halcones!*" he roared, deep-voiced. "Hell's Hawks for Trent!"

THE END

REBELLION IN HELL!

A Novel of Old California

By M. Howard Lane

Grim, stark tragedy was waiting for young Tod Barnett when he returned to the once-peaceful Valle de los Canadas, to find his family, friends and neighbors living like hunted beasts, their ranch houses and range devastated—and a red-handed madman living only for the day when the last honest cowman would be wiped forever from the land!

CHAPTER ONE

Argonaut's Return

THE weary traveler had come a long, hard way. His teak-brown face was young and yet old at the same time, which wisdom, trouble and the sight of many far places had given him.

He stood poised on the brow of a high hill where an off-shoot of the ancient Camino Real dipped downward into the Valle de los Canadas, and, oddly enough, he was keeping his brown eyes tightly closed.

From behind the glossy green of moun-

Crowley's bull-bellow shattered the morning: "Follow that double-crossing son!"

tain lilac fringing the Camino, a ragged young Californio watched this strange man who wore the garb of the sea, even to a red bandana caught tight about his hair. He could not understand the antics of the gringo. He could not see why the Americano should be standing here on the brink of the valley with his eyes shut.

Todd Barnett had a reason, though. A good reason. One he had been cherishing in his heart for five years and more.

Fifteen then, he was standing here now, remembering the calm loveliness of a long green valley that curved down between rolling hills to the incredible blue of the wide Pacific. The hills swept upward on either side of the valley to merge into the dusky green of mountains.

The first Spanish emmigrants who treked south down the coast from Monterey had found this valley, and they had named it, and the mountains. The mountains they called Cima de los Reposo.

Perhaps it had been that designation, The Peaks of Peace, which had attracted Henry Barnett, for on arriving in California, he had taken one look at turbulent, gold-mad San Francisco. Then he'd promptly bundled his family back into the Conestoga.

"They cain't eat gold," he had told his wife and son cannily. "We'll find ourselves a place where a man can break the sod, and live in peace!"

Thus the Barnetts had at last come to the Valle de los Canadas south of white-walled Monterey. Rich land was to be had for a few centavos an acre from Spanish-California owners who were friendly, and eager to please any who sought out their isolated Utopia.

Supplies had to be hauled by ox-team from Monterey forty miles up the coast, but that did not matter for time was the least of a man's worries here. On one of the trips, young Todd and the daughter of

a neighboring Californio family, Dona Luisa Ortega had accompanied the elder Barnett.

Luisa, it was, Todd figured now as he stood on the rim of home, who had probably carried screaming word to his father, that he had been picked up by a crew of sailors looking for seamen to shanghai. That he had fought them until an iron fist had knocked him unconscious with the words in his ears that, "the Cap'n needs a cabin boy, and you look likely."

Todd had awakened from his stupor to learn that he was bound for the Sandwich Islands on the brig *Sharpley*. Since that five-year-old day he had coursed the world from far-off Cathay to London, wherever ships made port. And during those five years he had grown into a tough, able-bodied seaman, ready to stand a watch with the best of them. Yet, always in the back of his mind had been the steady resolve to find a ship that would take him home again to Monterey.

He had spent many an off-watch hour during those lonely years dreaming of the Peaks of Peace, of his folks and the rambling log home they had raised in the Valle de los Canadas. And he had promised himself that when the hour came to view that long green haven again he would stand here with his eyes closed, and let his senses soak up the restfulness of home and forget the hard, bitter years behind.

A deep sigh moved Todd's wide chest. The past was a thing behind now. He could open his brown eyes and look upon something beside heaving waves. He could listen to the song of birds instead of the howling of the gale through rigging.

The young Californio watching this strange gringo from behind his screen of greenery saw the Americano's lips smile, and saw him open his eyes. And he saw also how the gringo's eyes widened, and how the smile froze into a grimace on his lips.

The expression was to be expected, for Todd was looking down at desolation.

"Good God!" the words burst unconsciously from him.

★

BELOW, the green sward of the Valle de los Canadas was as it had always been, but that was all. The adobe casas of Californios, and the log houses of American farmers were either burned ruins of roofless skeletons. Yards were weed-grown. Sheds, outbuilding, and barns were sagging, shapeless travesties. Cattle now roamed fields that once had been planted to corn and grain.

Only a single casa in all the length of the *Valle de los Canadas* seemed occupied now, and it was one Todd did not remember. Sprawling across the top of a domed knoll a good five miles up the valley it was still easy to view in the clear air of afternoon.

At the four corners square towers rose like blockhouses above the red-tile roofline. Huge enough to dwarf any of the casas that had ever graced this valley, it stood in aloof, grim grandeur. And even across the distance separating him from that enormous hacienda, Todd caught the unpleasant aura that seemed to emanate from it.

Instinctively, it came to him that the fortress-like hacienda had something to do with the disaster which had befallen this peaceful valley, and a cry that was more like a curse slipped from his lips.

"Que quiere? Why do you cry out, señor?" The liquid warm voice came from the cover of the mountain lilac siding the road.

Whirling toward the sound, Todd blinked. Here again was something unexpected.

The young Californio stood between two of the high green lilac shrubs. He was as tall as Barnett, and the tattered rags serving him for clothes had once

been as fine a hidalgo suit as a man could wish to wear. Black eyes were peering out at him steadily from the frame of a thin, haggard brown face.

Todd blinked, because in spite of rags and years gone he recognized the young man looking at him. A pitiful caricature of what he once had been, this Californio was Don Felipe Garcia Ortega, brother of Dona Luisa who had ridden to Monterey with him and his father on the day he had been shanghaied.

"Garcia!" Todd exclaimed. "Good God, man, don't you recognize me?"

It was the Californio's turn to study the square-jawed, blunt American face looking at him. Then slowly a surprised smile built on his lips. "Señor Barnett!" he cried softly. "Todd, *mi amigo!* Dios, it was never expected to see you again." A look of pain crossed Ortega's sensitive face as he spoke the words. *"Sin casa ni hogar,"* he murmured, "you have returned, and you are without home—"

The Californio's lips were about to frame more words, but they were never spoken. Intent upon the destruction in the valley, neither of them had heard the soft thud of a horse's hoofs through the dust of the Camino until one of the animal's hoofs struck a half-buried stone.

A cap-and-ball Colt roared right on the heels of the sound, and before he could even swing around, Todd heard it speak a second time. He saw twin spurts of dirt rise from between the sandaled feet of Garcia Ortega as the Californio youth whirled like a frightened animal and dove headlong into the mountain lilac and holly that grew thick along this rim of the valley. Instantly Ortega was gone from sight.

Curses were following the sound of gunfire as Todd twisted, his hand flying instinctively to the dirk worn inside the frayed rope belt banding his breeches. As he got around, he found himself looking squarely into the muzzle of death.

Smoke still dribbled from the long, octagonal barrel of the big Colt revolver. The smoke and the arrogant eyes peering down at him from the saddle aboard a tall palomino were the same hue.

"Sailor, eh?" the man behind the gun boomed. "Blast me, you're a long way from a ship, bucko!"

For a moment Todd stared at the man, his blood boiling at the unprovoked attack on the Californio. But now, he told himself fiercely, was no time to die. It looked like there were a lot of things that needed correcting here in the Valle de los Canadas!

Impressions came to him as he stared at the horseman. The man was dark-skinned as a Mexican, squat, broad. His heavy hips overflowed the confines of his magnificently carved Spanish saddle. Wide-chested as a bull, the gold-braided charro jacket he wore covered barely half of the fine white cambric expanse of his expensive shirt. A cone-peaked sombrero heavy with silver braid rode at an arrogant angle on the greasy black of his hair.

"Cain't you say something, bucko?" the squat giant grunted. "Blue hell and highwater, speak up, man. Me, I'm Leo Crowley. I own all this!" His expansive gesture included the Valle de los Canadas, and the Peaks of Peace.

During his years at sea, Todd had learned that sometimes the soft word gained a man more advantage than did a hard fist.

"Why, Mister Crowley," he said calmly, "all this good looking country just about dumbfounds me. Fella wouldn't expect to find a valley like this tucked away here. And you own it? Mister, I sure envy you!"

Crowley's lips were wide and loose. They turned in an expansive grin that moved his broad cheeks and narrowed his smoke-gray eyes to slits. Apparently he was pleased with the returned Argonaut's comments.

"Envy me, eh?" he drawled. "Now wouldn't that kill a dog." He ran his eye appraisingly over Barnett's compact body. "Might be," he went on, "I could use a good man like you, if you're handy with a gun."

Todd breathed deeply. There was only one way now that he might learn the details of the tragedy which had befallen his home and those of his friends. Crowley could provide the answers.

His fingers itched for the feel of the dirk at his belt, for by his own admission this arrogant hombre fronting him was the one who claimed ownership of the Valle de los Canadas now. To gain that ownership he had brought destruction to visit the Peaks of Peace.

"I'm handy with my fists, belaying pin, dirk or pistol," he said flatly. "And I'm tired of the sea. You've hired yourself a hand, Crowley."

From the cover of the holly and mountain lilac fringing the road unbelieving ears listened to him say that. Dark eyes which had begun to glow with a little hope turned dismal again.

Silent as the mountain ghost he had become, Garcia Ortega crept away to carry the sad news of an Argonaut's return to those lonesome ones in the hills waiting a word of cheer.

CHAPTER TWO

Casa del Infierno

LEO CROWLEY'S smile expanded. "Good!" he approved Barnett's decision. Into the tooled leather holster at his thigh, he rammed the big Colt. "Won't be needing this for awhile," he said in high good humor, "and I hope the one we strap on you shoots straighter than mine when we go looking for more of the two-legged varmints like the one I missed when I rode up."

Todd tipped his head down to fumble at the rope holding his pants, because he was afraid his expression might betray his feelings. When he raised his head again his face was smooth, impassive, and he knew he was going to have to keep it that way from now on. This was a desperate road to which he had set his feet, and death would be waiting for him at the end of it if Crowley got so much as an inkling that the Valle de los Canadas had been his home.

"I've been wondering about that," Todd said quietly. "Why for were you trying to fill that Mex kid full of lead?"

With a touch of the huge silver rowels at his heels, Crowley had urged his palomino forward as the returned Argonaut asked his question. "Step along beside me, bucko," he invited, "and I'll tell yuh as we move."

Arms as long and powerful as a gorilla's folded across the nub of his saddle, the master of the Valle de los Canadas stared down at his possessions.

"You want to know why I was trying to fill that greaser full of lead, eh?" he said finally. "Well, bucko, I'll tell ye. Six months ago I spotted me this valley and figgered it and these hills would make a right nice cattle range. There's a deep cove down on the sea front where I figger to build a wharf so's coasting ships can dock to pick up hides and taller. However, I cain't do it until I clean out the two-legged coyotes who are hounding my herds."

Todd wet his lips. He gestured at the shattered homes below them. "Looks like they was folks living here afore you came."

The Valley's master chuckled. "They was," he drawled, "but they ain't no more. Leo Crowley takes what he wants, bucko, and don't you beforgetting it. I offered the damned greasers and white trash that had *estancias* here the same price they'd paid for their acres."

"But they'd improved the land, makin'

it worth more," Todd said before he could stop the words.

Something that twined like a snake caught him across the shoulders as he finished speaking. Circled with fire, shock and pain drove a whistling breath from his lungs. Stumbling sideways, Todd twisted away from the quirt, and whirled, hand forking toward his belt.

Crowley's smoky-hued eyes were glowing slits. He had the long barrel of his Colt laid in the crook of his left arm. The quirt hung from his wrist.

"Don't tech that toad-stabber bucko," he said softly. "I was just teachin' you a little lesson that you'd better learn fast. When I say something's right, it's right. Get me? Remember that, and we'll get along fine. You won't regret working at the Casa del Infierno as the greasers call it."

"Casa of Hell?" Todd gritted. He was holding himself with an effort, by the reminder that only from Crowley could he learn what had happened to those who were gone.

"It's a good enough name," Crowley's swarthy face was smiling again. "Kinda tickles me. The trash who lived here tacked that handle on my hacienda after I give 'em twenty-four hours to vacate the valley. And you know what the cusses done?"

Todd shook his head. Shoulders still smarting he had learned the value of caution.

"Damned if they didn't gut their places of valuables and high-tail it for the high timber. Didn't git out like I told 'em." His gaze turned somberly toward the Peaks of Peace. "They're in 'em now—somewhere, denned up like a pack of coyotes. But I'll find their hide-out if it takes me a year! Ain't no man can buck Leo Crowley and live to talk about it. This hull coast from here to Mission San Luis Obispo is goin' to be mine. An empire, and I'll be its king! Ain't no pack of Mex scum and gringo trash going to keep Leo Crowley from taking what he wants!"

★

THAT was the last thing Crowley had to say as they moved slowly up the Valle de los Canadas toward his towered Casa of Hell.

Todd appreciated the silence. It gave him time to think. And the most startling conclusion he could draw was that he was in the company of a madman. Not mad in the sense that he belonged inside the high walls of some mental institution. His madness stemmed only from an overweening confidence in himself. In a wild desire to rule a coastal California empire, and the streak of cruelty he had displayed made him capable of going to any lengths to accomplish his purpose.

He had driven peaceful families from their homes, burned and ravaged their *estancias* when they had defied him, confident in the knowledge that there was no formal law to halt him.

The chances of helping dispossessed Los Canadans to regain their *estancias* looked less and less promising to Todd as they reached Crowley's Casa del Infierno.

An adobe wall ten feet high and a good five feet thick surrounded the hacienda on all four sides. Great arched gates of slab redwood bolted and banked with iron opened in front of them as they approached.

A stub-bodied man, as small as Crowley was large, grinned up at them. He had a withered, wicked little face and eyes that were as bright and black as chips of obsidian. Twin belts about his narrow waist supported a pair of big Colts.

"Howdy, chief," he greeted Crowley equably. "Saw you comin' and figgered I might as well meet yuh here at the gate to take the pilgrim off yore hands. Where'd you pick him up, anyway?"

Watching the man, Todd saw Crowley's

fat cheeks seem to rise and meet his eyes. Some signal, he was certain, had passed between these two, and yet he could not detect what it had been. It heightened the feeling of raw danger in him that he'd sometimes felt aloft in the ice-caked rigging of a ship with a high wind shrieking about him.

"Found him hoofing it along the Camino," Crowley murmured. "He was talking to that cussed greaser, Ortega, who spends his time spying on us. I missed the skunk, and after looking this bucko over, I figgered you might make a hand out of him. Claims he can use his maulers, pig-sticker, or Colt. Take him over to the commissary, and outfit him in decent clothes, and weapons. Feed him and line him up a string of broncs. We're going hunting this afternoon."

Todd watched an expression of sour distaste twist the little man's face. "So soon?" he questioned. "The boys are worn right down to the nub from chasing gringo ghosts through those damned redwoods."

Crowley's swarthy face darkened. "They ride or draw their time," he said savagely. "We're going to find the den of those damned Canadans or ride the legs off every horse here, and the pants off every man!"

★

MIDGET BILL WILLIAMS was the name of the little gunnie, Todd learned as he paced him across the hard-packed courtyard inside the great, walled enclosure.

"You can call me Bucko," Todd had told him blandly. "That name oughta do."

Williams shrugged. "Names don't mean much here," he said dryly. "I'm the only man around with guts enough to wear my own handle. All Crowley cares about is one thing. He wants the hombres that used to live in this valley, and he pays a cool five hundred dollars a pelt for every gringo or greaser we bring in—dead or alive. Me, I'm top-kick right now with five to my credit. Only thing is the cusses won't let theirselves be took alive. That's why they've been able to keep secret the location of their hide-out. Once we get a line on it, though, we'll wipe 'em out complete."

The casual way these men had of speaking of murder made their statements more powerful than if they bragged or spoke boastfully of their accomplishments. Todd recalled bleakly that he had shipped under some mighty tough captains, but for sheer callousness he'd never met the equal of Leo Crowley, and this little gunnie, Midget Bill Williams.

Two hours later he sat saddle in the courtyard along with twenty other Casa del Infierno warriors. A pair of the finest Colts obtainable rested at his thighs. A long, double-barreled rifle rode the boot beneath his leg. Bullet pouch, cap box, patchin' case, and powder flask snugged his belt. Garbed in a snug-fitting green drill shirt and breeches, he was dressed the same as the rest of Crowley's crew.

Williams had chuckled when Todd's eyes had widened on the clothes handed out to him by a clerk in the rancho's commissary. "Leo likes tuh see his men dressed all alike," he drawled. "These here togs were made special in Monterey so's to blend with the coloring of the mountains. Ain't many folks who think of the little things like Leo."

Todd could agree with that observation. Crowley's thought in providing these green suits for them to wear touched on the fiendish. Against the somber shadows beneath the redwoods cloaking the Peaks of Peace, they would be almost invisible, he realized. These clothes more than any spoken word brought home the grim truth of all that the master of the Valle de los Canadas had said. He would not, could not rest, until the hacienderos he'd dis-

possessed were dead or driven from the country.

And gradually they were being whittled down. Todd had learned that much from surreptitiously listening to the talk of the motley band Crowley had assembled. Motley as far as build and nationality went, but alike as peas in the one essential detail. All of them had the still, cold faces of men who enjoyed killing. He had wanted to ask if any man named Barnett had died beneath their guns, but that was a question he dared not voice for fear of arousing suspicion.

They didn't like him as it was, Todd had already discovered. They wouldn't, probably, until he proved himself.

Midget Bill Williams came swinging down from the vast, shaded verandah. Todd watched him approach and stop. He looked down at the wizened killer and his face was still. Williams returned the scrutiny, something ironic in his black eyes.

"Bucko," he drawled, "Leo has a standin' rule for new men. I forgot to mention it. He likes for you boys to show your worth fust time out by baggin' leastways a greaser. If you don't—" he let the sentence hang, and his shrug carried many interpretations.

CHAPTER THREE

Death Stalks the Stalkers

TODD rode into the redwood heights of the Peaks of Peace between Crowley and Williams. There had been little talk between them during the ride from the Casa del Infierno. Talk that Todd would have welcomed to keep him from thinking. He was jarred from his bitter reflections by Crowley's voice speaking to all of them as they halted on the edge of timber.

"Pair off by twos," the man directed. "Fan out across this canyon and cover it right to the summit of the peaks. I want it skimmed as clean as cream from a bowl," he went on savagely, "and if I catch a man slackin' on the job I'll take care of himself. Remember that!"

Todd looked at Crowley's huge hands, and he knew there was enough strength in either of them to snap a man's spine at a single blow. Then his attention was brought back to Crowley's words.

"There's a five thousand dollar bonus in it for the first gent who locates the den these cusses are usin'," he reminded. "It's up here on this flank of the range, because when the devils sneak out to raid my herds their tracks always haid back thisaway. We've covered most of this mountain like a barber combin' your hair. Remember there's five thousand for the man locatin' their hide-out. Its his for the keepin', and a job for life to boot. Now get out, and go to collecting!"

"Good huntin', boys!" Williams echoed. "Hell's Army," he added, glancing obliquely at Todd. "Nice outfit you've j'ined up with, bucko. Hope for your sake that you'll take a hankering to it."

"I have already," Todd answered, but neither of his companions caught the double meaning of his remark. They couldn't realize that this might be the only way a returned Argonaut might locate the Los Canadans he would side when the right opportunity came.

Innumerable side-draws, so narrow that towering redwoods almost joined their feathery crests above them spoked off on either side of this central canyon.

"Like hunting for a cussed grain of sand on the bottom of the ocean," Williams grumbled his impatience when they had completed a cautious ride up the third of the side-draws.

Crowley had no answer to make. His swarthy face wore a look of vast, concentrated patience. He was the one first to see the bent, white-haired old figure crouched beside a spring as they swung

their mounts into the fourth draw on their side of the canyon.

Instantly one of his big hands was loosing the riata slung at the horn of his massive saddle. Todd saw that action first, and then his eyes swung forward. Through an aisle formed by arching trees he glimpsed the bent figure at the spring, and guessed Crowley's intent even before the man's faint whisper reached his ears.

"I've waited since hell was born for this chance!" he muttered fiercely. "We'll take this one alive, boys, and he'll tell us all we want to know before we're done with him. Hot bark pads against his feet will turn the trick. If it don't, I've a few others that will. Git your ropes, and fan out!"

They had equipped him with murderous, Mexican spurs for this ride. Right now Todd was glad of it. Leg muscles coiling he drove them deep into the tender flanks of his mount.

The animal reared, snorting with pain. Between the animal's ears, Todd saw the bent oldster at the spring twist around, a startled expression on his face. Silent-hoofed on the brown mat of needles beneath the redwoods the horses had made no sound to apprise the old Californio of danger. Todd saw inexpressible terror cross the other's face, then as though he were confused, he took a faltering step toward them.

Midget Bill Williams had a Colt in his hand. It had come from his holster like streaking light, and it spoke before Todd could swing his crazed mount to jostle the other's aim.

His eyes, in this moment were like a camera, registering every impression that came to him. As the Colt's roar shattered the mountain stillness, and lead found their quarry's heart, Todd saw a smile that seemed to have satisfaction in it cross the dying man's face. Then his view was masked by Crowley's squat shape, as he yanked his horse around to face the two of them. Rage was twisting Crowley's mouth.

"Damn you, both!" His voice was rising into a scream. "The thing I wanted, in my hands! And you two blundering fools took it from me. Bucko, what in the name of blue hell and highwater got into that horse of yours to make it rear like that?"

Todd shook his head. He made his voice sound puzzled, and placating at the same time. "I dunno, chief. I swear I don't. Less'n mebbe a bee I noticed buzzing around back aways took a notion to sample this bronc."

But Crowley wasn't even listening. His wrath turned its force on the dimunitive Williams who was casually blowing smoke from the muzzle of his Colt. "And you! You shot him!"

The poise of the little man was something to admire. Todd watched him icily answer the misshapen master of the Canada. "Another minute and he'd have been gone like a lizard. You think I'm passing up a chance to boost my score—and pocket book? If you do, I'll ride out right now."

Crowley's lips still twitched with anger but his face had smoothed. He gave a brief glance at the crumpled figure beside the spring then brought his attention back to his companions.

"All right," he said surlily, "we'll forget it. A mistake's a mistake, and we might as well ride back and signal the boys to come in. There'll be no more hunting this afternoon. The sound of that gun of yours will carry for miles." His smoky eyes swung to Todd. "That's one reason we've only been able to whittle 'em down. Once a gun talks up here we might as well go home."

There was another reason why the Casa del Infierno was a good place to go after a Colt shattered this ancient solitude. Todd learned the reason within the next fifteen minutes, and the knowledge sent

rage-hot blood pounding through him.

They were out in the main canyon now, riding through the dusky aisles, when a riderless horse came galloping toward them. Crowley cursed and sent spurs deep into the flanks of his palomino.

"Come on!" He ripped out the words.

A hundred yards ahead lay a green-garbed shape. Reined up around the man, Todd looked down, and the blood pounding in his veins sounded like a drum against his ears. The hell-rider on the ground was dead. A feathered shaft had driven through his throat from front to back, severing his jugular. He was one, man was buried. Now that safety was theirs inside the fortress walls of the casa, spirits were high again as men gathered at the cantina Crowley provided for them.

"Their ain't many bosses," one of the half-drunken riders proclaimed, "who sets free drinks on the bar. What if Slant James did die today with an arrer through his gullet? We're still here, and likely tuh stay. Let's hoist one to Slant!"

Todd toyed with a single drink at a corner of the short bar, and a plan started forming in his mind as he watched these men drink to forget the feathered death that came to haunt them whenever they

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the returned Argonaut thought, who would do no more manhunting for the dispossessed hacienderos of the Valle de los Canadas.

★

DEATH was stalking them now. As the manhunters came straggling into the mouth of the canyon in answer to the three shots Crowley had fired to signal them, Todd could read fear in each face. And when they reached the Casa del Infierno, with the dead man roped across his own saddle, Todd saw Crowley's private boothill for the first time.

There were ten neat mounds in a row beneath a spreading oak tree, and he realized grimly that the Los Canadans were not the only ones who had paid the last penalty in this lost cause fight to regain their homes.

Night had come by the time the dead rode into the once peaceful Peaks of Peace.

As he stood there, he was remembering the sharp impressions he had caught when they had surprised the white-haired oldster at the spring. The old Californio had risen, and instead of fleeing he had started directly into their guns.

"And when he took Williams lead, and knew he was dying," Todd recalled. "He had a smile on his face like he was almost glad. . . ."

There was only one reason for that emmigrant to smile at death, the Argonaut realized. That was because by dying he had outwitted the overlord of the Valle de los Canadas. Todd pondered the thought, then downed his drink.

Chinese cook-boys were now filling the plank tables scattered about the murky cantina with great platters of food. Moving to one of them, Todd felt hunger bite at him, and he remembered that he hadn't eaten since the previous night. Yet all the

while that he was filling himself with a huge meal, his mind couldn't loose the idea clinging to the edge of it. That Californio had had some reason for figuring he'd outwitted Crowley. If he could learn the answer. . . .

A possible solution came to him as he finished eating. That white-haired old Californio had been glad to sacrifice himself because by so doing he had saved the lives of other hard-pressed hacienderos who had once been free men tilling the acres of their own valley estancias.

As the thought came to him, Todd felt excitement stir his blood. If his guess was right, it could mean but one thing. That innocent looking sidewash where they had surprised the oldster was the entrance to the secret hideout from which the dispossessed rancheros sallied forth to harass the herds which Crowley had brought into the Valle de los Canadas.

The forcefulness of his conclusion lifted him from the table, then he steadied and yawned expansively. "You gents are toughened to riding," he said to the room at large, "but my sea-legs ain't got used to a saddle yet. I'm stretching 'em a bit and then hitting the hay."

No one answered him, and he strolled through the door into the outer darkness. With silent strides, he slipped around the side of the cantina and headed for the big stables where horses were always stalled ready for quick riding.

Whale-oil lanterns, hung from stanchion pegs, cast a fitful illumination along the stable's main runway. Todd gave one swift glance about. He could see no one. The tack-room door was closed but Crowley kept only his fanciest saddles in there. From a tree outside a stocky black's stall, Todd swung a plain saddle. Moving fast and silently, he readied the black for travel, and led the animal into the runway.

Lips pursed thoughtfully, he took one of the whale-oil lanterns from its peg, and puffed out the light. Flint and steel would rekindle its flame when the right time came. Carrying the lantern by its bale in his right hand, he led the black toward the courtyard.

The tack-room door opened on the runway. As he stepped abreast of it, the door swung inward. Framed in the opening stood one of Crowley's riders. Lantern light flickered along the barrel of the Colt poised in his right hand.

"Goin' somewhere, mister?" And Death lay behind the soft spoken words.

CHAPTER FOUR

Prodigal's Welcome

THE needs of the sea had honed Todds' reflexes to razor sharpness. Still holding the reins in his left hand a single side-step carried him sidewise to within reach of the man. Like a pendulum the heavy lantern in his right hand was swinging upward toward the taunting face of the other.

Todd saw surprise and fear cross the man's face and he tried to dodge backward, but his move came too late. The heavy iron base of the lantern caught him squarely beneath the chin, and knocked his head backward. Todd heard the brittle snap of breaking bone, and he knew as the man went down that Crowley's boothill had gained another inmate.

In order to shut the tack-room door, he had to roll the dead stable-guard out of the way. Touching the body knotted his stomach. For a moment Todd thought he was going to be sick. In the turbulent years behind him, he had grown used to the sight of death, but this was the first time he had ever killed a man. Then the memory of that white-haired Californio who had been shot down so ruthlessly that afternoon came into his mind, and chill, hard pleasure that he had evened the score drove away the feeling of sickness.

"You'll have company in hell, old-timer!" he muttered under his breath.

Less than an hour later, he was spraying sparks against the wick of the lantern that had proved such an effective weapon. Leaving the compound of the Casa del Infierno had been comparatively easy. If watchers in each of the corner blockhouses had seen him leave they had probably figured he was going on guard duty at one of the herds grazing in the valley.

Riders leaving the casa was not their worry. Only those approaching Crowley's vast stronghold were of any interest to them.

Now he was in the mouth of the canyon where the crew had started their manhunt that afternoon. Light burning brightly against the somber canyon darkness, Todd started forward again. He had not brought the lantern to light his own way. He was hoping as he rode that haciendero watchers might be keeping a vigil here to guard against a surprise night raid. If they were, there was danger in this course he had chosen, Todd knew, for feathered death might come before talk to search him out.

He had passed the three side-draws they had examined in order that afternoon, and the mouth of the fourth was not far ahead. Minutes now might prove his hunch right or wrong, Todd realized.

The night was still all about him save for a faint high breeze rustling through the crowns of the redwoods towering two hundred feet above him. Drawing closer now to the mouth of that fourth draw, Todd's thoughts turned to the people he might soon be meeting.

Garcia Ortega would have told his father and mother by now that he had returned, and so their surprise would not be too great at seeing him. He wondered, too, if Dona Luisa Ortega would be here to welcome him. There had been many times during the lonely years when he had thought of her, imagining as best he could the beauty that must be hers now.

"Parada, maldito!" Halt, bad one!" the words came without warning from behind a boulder almost beside him, and Todd heard the whisper of a bowstring drawn taut.

Instantly he checked the black, and swung the lantern high enough to show the blunt lines of his face. At the same time the spreading light showed him a ragged figure risen from behind the boulder. Arrow notched to the crude bow, the Californio could draw and loose the shaft in the space of a breath. Todd recognized the guard.

"Garcia, *mi amigo!*" he could not keep the pleasure from his voice. "This is luck!"

The young Californio's lips wore no answering smile. "Perhaps not so much luck as you may think, Señor Barnett," he said grimly. "Remove from yourself those guns you wear and toss them here close to me. Then dismount. I will feel a horse between my legs again, and *you* will do the walking! *Es verdad!*"

★

SPEECHLESS at this unfriendly reception, Todd unlatched his gunbelt and tossed it to a cushion of needles at the base of the boulder. Silently, he swung from his saddle. The thought crossed his mind that Garcia might really believe that he had joined forces with the man who had ravaged their homes, then quickly he rejected the idea. No Los Canadan in his right mind could believe such a thing.

"Andale!" Ortega said curtly when he had swung to the back of the Argonaut's horse. "Walk straight on past the spring. Do not try and lose me, señor, for my finger is itching for to pull the trigger of thees gun you have been so kind as to give me."

Even as a youngster, Garcia Ortega

had been bull-headed, Todd recalled. He made no effort to argue with the young Californio. Once they reached his father and the rest, a few words of explanation would accord him a royal welcome, Todd told himself.

He put his attention on moving straight ahead through darkness almost as intense as the gloom of a tomb. Great shadowy redwoods rose on both sides, and as he passed the spring the steep canyon walls narrowed swiftly. Trees torn from their precarious rooting in the rocky side-walls of the gulch made a giant jack-straw labyrinth on either side now, and as he rounded an unexpected bend in the gulch, Todd paused involuntarily. Straight ahead some ancient windstorm had toppled mountain mammoths into a gigantic dead-fall tangle that appeared to block the wash with solid tons of timber.

As he stared at the tangle, Todd heard Ortega chuckle mirthlessly. "Perhaps," he said, "the Crowley *cabrone* would think like you, señor, that there is no way past that barrier. And he would be right. One cannot ride around those trees—but he can pass beneath them! Spread the screen of holly at its base, señor, and you will see what I mean." Icily polite, the young Californio added a further grim warning. "I must warn you, señor," he said flatly, "to make no effort to escape me, once we are beneath the dead-falls or we will both die. The vibration of one shot might, I fear, bring down many many tons of logs to crush us both!"

Todd parted the curtaining holly. Light from the whale-oil lantern which Ortega had appropriated spread enough brightness to show him the amazing proof of the Californio's words. Looking up was like staring at a massive, frozen log jam. Logs, tangled and splintered, and yet Ortega had said they were ready at the slightest shock to come crashing down and block forever the channel beneath.

A dozen strides carried Todd the length of the tunnel. Here again was fresh surprise. On either side naked cliffs towered sheer for a hundred feet. Huge, spaced boulders at the rim of the bluffs were silhouetted against the shine of the night sky, and like socketless eyes in the sides of both sheer walls were the openings of small caves.

Ortega seemed to sense the scope of the Argonaut's inspection. "A race long before us sought refuge here," he said flatly. "The caves were their homes. We are forced to use them now. How long it will be necessary for us to stay here like coyotes in their dens only the good Dios knows. But this I can tell you, señor," he ended fiercely, "the day will come when we will once more return to our *estancias* in the Valle de los Canadas."

A plan was starting to grow in Todd's mind. "I—" he began, but Ortega cut him short.

"Save your forked words, señor, for the council," he said savagely. Then, as thick holly and buckbrush that had blocked their view ahead rolled back on either side he added, "Look you. Did I not say the council was in session? It is a sad man," he added in bitterly somber tones, "who conducts their meeting, and seeing you will not make him feel any better!"

Todd heard an unexpected whishing sound above his head, and instinctively he ducked, but he was not quick enough to elude the dexterous cast of the riata that had been caught about the horn of his saddle. The plaited loop slipped over his head, and bit like a steel band as it slipped down about his upper arms.

This was unnecessary ignominy. Todd clawed at the rope, then he felt himself jerked from his feet as Ortega spurred the black past him. Helpless to protect himself, he was dragged into the circlet of light cast by burning redwood slabs.

"Holá!" Ortega announced himself. "I

bring us a prize, amigos. In a day that is best forgotten he was one of us!"

Disheveled and dirty, Todd scrambled to his feet as he felt the rope slacken a little. Men and women circled him, Californio and American alike. Many of them he had known and he knew that the recognition was mutual, yet there were no smiles to welcome him.

"A nice home-coming!" he said hoarsely, and he couldn't keep the bitterness from his voice.

Three figures were approaching from the darkness beyond the council fire. One broke away from the other, and on light feet came flying through those grouped about the circle. It was Dona Luisa Ortega. Todd felt his heart leap suddenly. The girl was coming directly to him. A spitfire as he remembered her, her tongue had lost none of its acid bite.

"For shame, Garcia!" her words cut at her brother like the thonged end of a quirt. "Whatever you think of Señor Barnett, is it necessary that he be treated like a dog?"

"Ask him what happened to our uncle, Don Aguilar, this afternoon." Ortega's anger was unbending.

Skirts swirling, the girl ignored her brother's remark. With a quick gesture she caught the rope from about the Argonaut's shoulders. Her smile as her hands came out to Todd was joyous. He caught her fingers, and for one heady second this was the homecoming he had expected. The desire was strong in him to draw Luisa into his arms, but he throttled the impulse.

The other two figures had reached the council circle now. One was Todd's mother. The other was his father—a tall, somber shape with silver hair brushing the ragged collar of his shirt. Deep lines marked his craggy face. His parents had aged terribly during the years of his absence, Todd realized.

Unthinkingly he started forward, with his hands outstretched. "Dad! Mother!"

Henry Barnett raised his hand. No man better than himself knew the effort this was costing him. "Todd Barnett," he said in heavy tones that disavowed any knowledge that this prisoner facing him was his son, "you are charged with accepting employment from Leo Crowley. You have ridden with him, and by your direct action, you have brought about the death of one of us. You need not lie. Eyes saw your action this afternoon. For that death you have caused to one of us there is but one verdict this council of the Los Canadas can render. Come dawn you will be taken to the edge of the Valley and hanged by the neck, until dead!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Sanctuary for the Damned

LUISA ORTEGA was twisting toward her mounted brother even as she cried, "He will not!"

Todd saw her reach up and pluck one of his revolvers from the pair of holsters Garcia had slung about his own waist. Glinting blue in the night, she flipped the heavy weapon toward him. Her move had been so swift and unexpected that it caught Todd as unprepared as the rest. Reflex action alone made him reach out and snag that spinning weapon out of the air.

Touch of the cold steel against his palm brought him instant recovery. "Don't reach for that other gun of mine, Ortega, when yuh climb down from my saddle. I'd hate to have to feed you the same kind of treatment you've been handing me."

"Bruja!" the Californio spat the word at his sister as he swung reluctantly from leather.

Todd grinned. "Don't call her hellcat," he said grimly. "She's done you all a favor!" With a lithe, quick swing he was in the saddle Ortega had just vacated, and his gun menaced all of them.

"I'm not blaming you," he spoke to the group, but by his words he was trying to rouse some spark of understanding in his father's face, "for treating me the same as you would any of Crowley's hell-riders. Mebbe it's got a little hard for you to think straight, being holed up here, and hunted like a pack of lobo coyotes. But if you *had* stopped to think, you'd see that I took a job with Crowley to get a line on what we're all up against.

"If Garcia knew what I know, he'd have done the same as me this afternoon. Since you holed up here, Crowley's been trying to take one of you alive, to torture into telling him where this hideout is located. And don't think he couldn't do it! That's why I let the old don we surprised this afternoon know we were there. He died quick, and that's a heap sight better end than he'd have found in the Casa del Infierno!"

"Lies!" Garcia Ortega snapped.

"Let us hear this man out," Henry Barnett boomed. The frozen composure of his craggy face was breaking into something resembling a smile. "If he has risked so much to reach us, perhaps he brings salvation."

Todd felt his heart warming. "Call it what you want," he said quietly, "I'm bringing you an idea. If you're willing to play out the hand, it will likely spell freedom or death!"

"Let us hear this plan, son," Henry Barnett said.

Todd nodded. "Likely you've got powder and guns here that you've been hoarding against a showdown fight."

"We have," Henry Barnett agreed.

"Take a canister of powder," Todd was speaking directly to his father, "and plant it in the logs jamming the entrance to this gorge. Detail one man to lay a train and stay with it. The rest of you get up top," he gestured with the muzzle of the Colt in his hand toward the cliffs on either side. "Wait there with your rifles primed. You'll know when to break that log jam, and open fire."

"And how will we know?"

"When I lead Crowley and his hell-riders back here at dawn!"

AS HE rode now toward the gates of the Casa del Infierno, Don Luisa Ortega's horrified cry at his plan was still ringing in his ears. "But, Todd, *mi querida,* you will be in the trap with these *cabrones* of hell!"

The gate through which he had departed was still open, and as he rode through it he thought for a moment that his absence had not been discovered, then a voice wickedly soft came at him from the thick shadows to one side.

"Hold up, Bucko, you've got a mite of explaining to do."

Todd recognized the tones of Midget Bill Williams, and he knew in the same instant that there was only one way to play this game.

"I'll do my talking to Crowley," he snapped, and kept riding. "Come along, if you want to listen in."

The wizened killer chuckled mirthlessly as he came from the shadows. "Leo's waiting," he murmured. "I hope your talk is good—for your sake!"

Williams was right. There were many lights still glowing behind the windows of the Casa del Infierno. Todd sucked a deep breath into his lungs as he swung from leather, and paced Midget Bill across the veranda to a thick oak door. Williams entered without the formality of a knock.

Crowley stood across the room from them. No flicker of expression touched his face as Todd stopped in front of him.

Only the slits of his eyes scanned the disheveled appearance of the Argonaut, and Todd silently thanked Garcia for having dragged him across the stony ground of the ancient Indian sanctuary. It would make the story he had to tell this squat

overlord of the Valle de los Canadas more plausible.

A gun-muzzle bored into his back unexpectedly. "Start talking, Bucko," Midget Bill Williams said softly. "There's a dead man out in the barn, and he warn't there before you pulled out."

Williams' words had given him an opening. Todd answered the small killer without taking his eyes from Crowley. "Your man was dead when I got to the barn," he said calmly. "Would I be sticking my nose back here if I'd killed him?" Mebbe before you hear me out you'll be taking that Colt out of my back and handing it to me on a platter. Chief," he addressed Crowley directly, "you owe me five thousand dollars!"

For the space of a minute the squat giant didn't appear to understand the Argonaut's remark, then his little eyes blinked. "Are you telling me," he seemed to be savoring the words, "that you've located that coyote nest of valley scum?"

Todd nodded. "Yes," he said flatly. "Yore boys will tell you I took me a saunter around after supper. When I got close to the barns, I saw an hombre making a run for the wall, and followed him. He had a horse outside, and I saw him head off toward the Peaks of Peace. Wasn't time to make a holler so I threw leather on a bronc, went out the East Gate, and trailed him. He's the one who killed yore stableman.

"I trailed the cuss to that side canyon where Williams, here, nailed himself that Los Canadan this afternoon, and you can believe it or not, chief, the hombre rode underneath a pile of deadwood timber that looks like it fills the end of that gulch clean to the bottom. I Indianed in after him and saw a fire with a lot of people around it in the gorge beyond. Soon as I saw what was there I high-tailed it back to my bronc, and headed for here."

Crowley's eyes were the thinnest of slits again. "Turn out the crew," he directed Williams almost gently. "We're riding in thirty minutes!"

★

NIGHT was graying into dawn, when Todd gestured at the mass of tangled redwoods.

His anxious eyes were scanning the mass for any sign that might betray the trap laid for the riders of Casa del Infierno, but nothing showed in the dull dawn light.

There were twenty men behind himself, Williams, and the master of the Valle de los Canadas.

Todd could find no pity in his heart for them. Death might be his own pay for this, but if he died to free fifty others, Todd knew that he could figure his life well-spent.

Leo Crowley's low, thoughtful growl broke the run of his thoughts.

"That hat of yores, Bill," he was murmuring to Williams, "ain't worth a damn to you, but it'd make a right nice case to hold about half the powder we got between us. Looks to me like we could blow that bunch of logs down with a charge and stopper this gulch like you would a bottle. Pickin' 'em off afterward should make a right nice bit of sport!"

"Bueno!" Williams approved. "Five hundred still the price for a prime pelt?"

Todd listened to the words and the surprise of Crowley's counter plan speeded his thoughts. Those poorly armed Los Canadans were already waiting on the cliffs. If Crowley's double-gunned fighters met them up there it would be slaughter.

He found reckless words on his lips as his spurs raked his mount.

"You'll collect your bounty on men ready to fight back!" he told them defiantly, and the brown leaped forward.

Crowley's bull bellow shattered the morning. "Hold yore fire!" he yelled

savagely. "Follow that double-crossing son. We'll still hand 'em a dawn surprise!"

Branches slashed at his face as he swept through the screening fringe of holly beneath the massive, windfall barrier, and the pain of their strike put only an added edge of pleasure to the savage joy flowing through him. Hoofs muffled by carpeting needles were rising to muted thunder behind him. Crowley was leading his men into a death trap. A trap that might close its jaws on him, too, Todd knew, but he was past caring.

He was in the gorge now, pounding straight ahead. Behind him, Todd heard Colt fire open up. He felt the brown horse under him shudder as lead ripped through its body. The animal was stumbling, dying on its feet, and lead was in the air all about him when an explosion that drowned all sound rocked the gorge.

They had used twice the powder necessary to blast that wind-fall log jam was the thought that caught at Todd's suddenly stunned senses. Great boulders balanced at the edge of the high cliffs were doing a strange, Gargantuan dance all their own—teetering, swaying, tottering, and all at once Todd realized that men driven here to this gorge in ages past had patiently rolled those mammoth stones into place as a means of protecting their sanctuary in case of invasion.

The explosion that had settled the log jam was starting those stones into motion now. Like giant projectiles they toppled forward, came rumbling down the walls of the narrow gorge on either side. Like mill wheels of the gods they would meet on its floor and grind men and animals alike into nothingness.

Todd freed his feet of stirrup leather. As the brown sagged forward he went over its head, lit running. Hope for life lay only in reaching one of the caves at the base of the cliffs. Shards of stone torn from boulders as they struck the canyon floor were filling the air now like lethal grape shot. A sharp-edged shred caught the Argonaut in the left shoulder, and Todd felt himself falling.

The mouth of a cave was only a few rods ahead. Crawling toward that goal, he reached it, and turned to survey the destruction of the canyon, but his view was blocked by a squat, bloody giant.

One of Crowley's arms hung limp, broken at his side. Half of his swarthy face had been ripped by another shard of stone, but he was still on his feet, and the gun in his good fist was still filled with death.

Todd twisted himself sidewise as the weapon spoke. He felt the whisper of lead past his cheek, and then he had his own Colt in numbed fingers. His arm felt the shock as he pressed the trigger. Through eyes dimmed with grit he saw the other half of the Valle master's face spurt blood, and he knew that Leo Crowley who had wanted to rule a coast empire would do his ruling from now on in a hell of his own creation.

There was death, and nothing but death, in the canyon now. Todd stared out at it from the entrance of the cave where he had sought shelter, and he felt a ragged breath stir his chest.

It would be a long time, he knew, before the Valle de los Canadas would look like the home to which he had waited five years to return, but when the fields were planted again, men and women could forget this bloody interlude.

On his feet, he managed to move into the open and raise an arm toward the rim above. Waving hands and a cry that he could barely make out answered him from there, and he knew that the three people who meant the most to him had seen his raised arm.

Dona Luisa had been the one to cry out and her words, *"Mi querida"* were a promise of bright hope for the future. . . .

THE END

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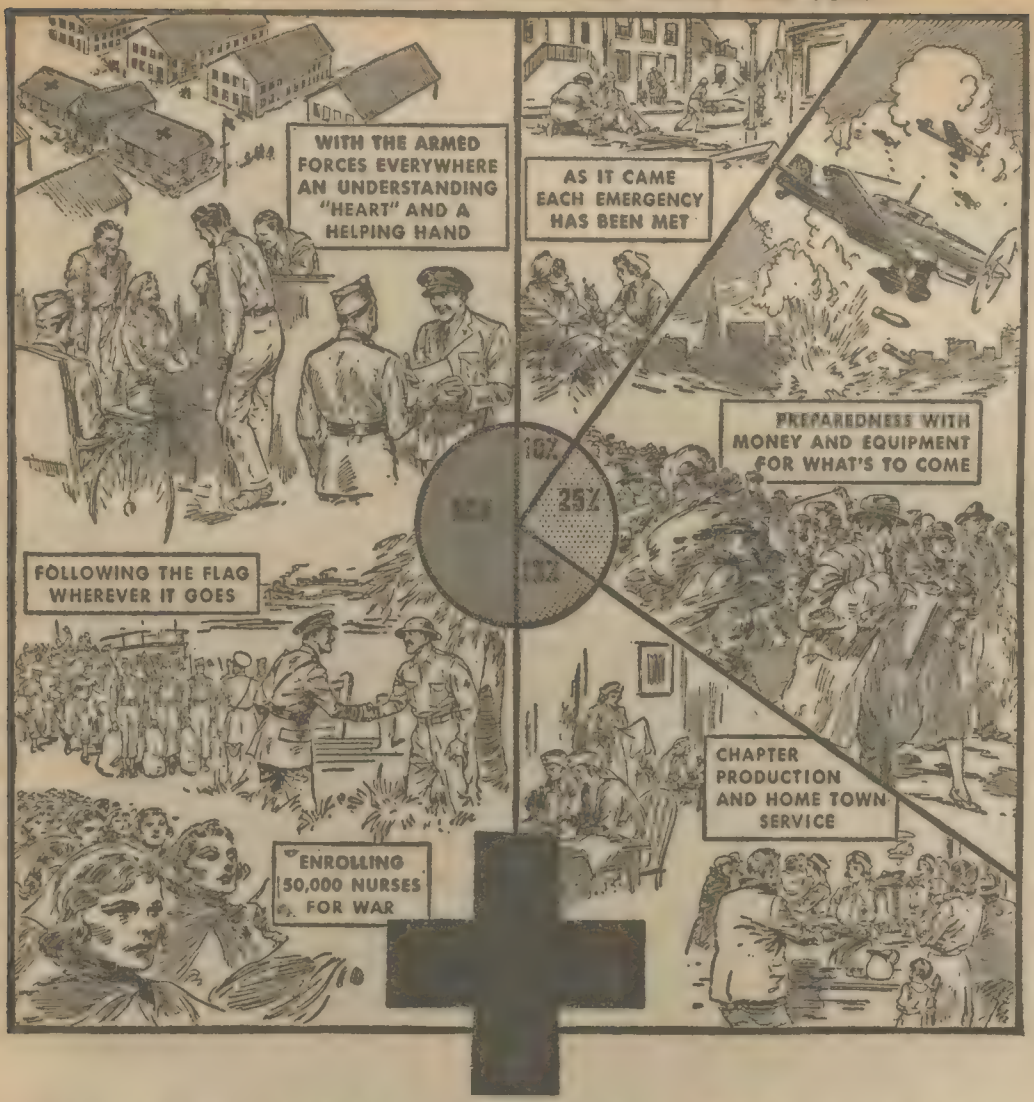
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★ FIRE AND BRIMSTONE

A New Deacon Bottle Novel

By Robert E. Mahaffay

The Deacon had been called to deliver one of his famous brimstone preachments, and he vowed he'd make one—even if he talked through powdersmoke to a whiskey congregation that wanted only to kill the preacher!

CHAPTER ONE

One-Man Town

DEACON BOTTLE scrubbed with a plump fist at the sweat coursing across his forehead and surveyed the town. His buckskin, wringing wet,

FOR THE DEACON ★

Four of those solid smashes were enough. The driver went off the wagon. . . .

drifted along the street lackadaisically.

Even the town's name, Bent Hump, was unsavory. Under the sweltering sun its single crooked street, lined with ramshackle buildings, appeared shriveled and worthless.

Still, Bent Hump—or a man in Bent Hump named Ed Moran—had requested one of the Deacon's preachments. The Deacon would have found a way of getting to the moon if a community there had expressed an interest in his ministerial services.

Two huge freight wagons, tandem hitched, were having a time negotiating

the hook in the town's sloping street. Brakes squawling, the driver put his leaders up over the walk on the right-hand side and his rolling wheels barely cleared the buildings which jutted on the left-hand corner.

This building appeared to be the pivot of the town. It was the largest, and the only one which had ever smelled paint. A weathered sign proclaimed that it was a store, a bar and the marshal's office.

As the freighter came around the corner a young bare-headed fellow called, "Got those sawmill parts, Zeke?"

The driver was too busy cursing his team to reply.

Deacon Bottle looped his reins over the tie rail, stepped across the walk. His low-crowned black hat was pushed back and his patched frock coat was open, revealing the twin silver-mounted sixguns which had made him famous.

The forward corner of the store was occupied by a cubbyhole of an office. Deacon Bottle rocked ponderously past it to the bar and, smiling, ordered his favorite drink, Old Pepper, a brew regarded by many as a second-grade explosive.

"I'm hunting a feller named Ed Moran," he offered, as the dust in his throat began to disintegrate.

The bartender, a horse-jawed man with pointed ears, shook his head. "Never heard of him."

"I got a letter from him," objected the Deacon, rummaging in a hip pocket.

"Might ask Cass Blaird." The barkeep was indifferent.

"Blaird?"

The barkeep nodded toward the cubbyhole office. "Owns this town. This setup here an' the freight line an' about everything else that's worth a damn. He's mayor an' town marshal to boot."

Deacon Bottle chuckled. "Sounds like a pretty good all-around feller."

"He's all that," said the barkeep bleakly, "an' a little bit more."

Deacon Bottle rapped at the cubbyhole door, got a summons and went in.

The man seated behind the desk slid a drawer shut with his knee as he examined his visitor, and the Deacon had an impression that a gun had been lying there convenient to his hand.

Cass Blaird's face was shriveled and dry, though he didn't appear to be over fifty. He had a narrow pair of shoulders under a shiny black coat. His eyes were the same glistening dark color, and in them was an implacable stare which never shifted or softened.

The Deacon fumbled for the letter. "I'm Deacon Bottle," he explained. "Do a little preachin' now and again, when I'm asked. Feller named Ed Moran wrote me from here, invitin' me up."

Blaird accepted the letter. His unrelenting gaze scanned it, then returned to the Deacon's plump, moonlike face.

"There's no Ed Moran here," he stated. "Never has been."

"There's the letter an' there's the name," protested the Deacon gently. "Somebody around here has got to be Ed Moran."

Blaird shrugged. "A joke, probably," he said.

"Mister," said Deacon Bottle, "my preachments ain't exactly jokes. Not to me, anyhow. So, being as I'm on the ground, I'll unlimber one as soon as it's generally convenient."

"It won't be convenient," said Blaird, placing two clawlike hands on the table before him, "while I'm running this town."

Deacon Bottle rubbed reflectively at his round jaw. "I hate making a two-day ride for nothing," he declared. "I skipped a pretty important job to come up here. Seems the railroad has been losing some stuff. Among other things, a boxcar full of barreled whiskey was busted open down at Pinnacle Junction. I was supposed to look into it, but I figured this preachment

was more important. So I came here. If it can't be done convenient, it'll have to be done inconvenient."

"Not here," said Blaird. His gleaming dark eyes had the chill of black ice. The move of his right hand was no more than a flick.

Deacon Bottle was alive because he was a master of gun handling, but he had never seen a sleeve derringer shaken out with such precision and dispatch.

The blunt muzzles of the weapon gaped unwaveringly at his middle.

"Get out," said Blaird. "Get back to Latigo where they're a little less particular what kind of a fourflusher they listen to. You've played a smooth game down there, with your two-bit preaching to cover whatever crooked play you happen to have a finger in. You can't work it here. We run whiskey-guzzling jailbirds out of this town, whether they happen to have a gun rep or not."

★

IT WAS a long time since anyone had spoken so bluntly to Deacon Bottle. Part of it was true—or had been once. That part of his life was past, and long since had been buried under a flood of better things.

His blue eyes lost their mildness. He put both hands on the desk, leaning toward Cass Blaird.

"Pull that trigger," he said, "or put your popgun down. Do one or the other quick—or I'll take it away from you and ram it between your teeth!"

Blaird didn't stir, nor did the implacable stare from his black eyes alter. The force of the man was a live thing, as powerful and callous as a blizzard.

He was opening his mouth for his answer when the hammer of striding boots checked him. The door swung open with a crash behind Deacon Bottle.

"Blaird, damn you, is that freight agent of yours crazy or crooked?"

The words came with a roar from a young, blond-headed fellow who was built like a bull and who slammed an anvil fist on the desk at the Deacon's elbow.

The Deacon flashed him a look. When his glance came back, the derringer had disappeared, and Blaird's scrawny hands were folded in front of him.

"He's neither crazy nor crooked," Blaird said coolly. "He's running a business. What's your trouble?"

Says Everybody is HYPNOTIZED

A strange method of mind and body control, that leads to immense powers never before experienced, is announced by Edwin J. Dingle, well-known explorer and geographer. It is said to bring about almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind. Many report relief of long standing illness. Others acquire superb bodily strength and vitality, secure better positions, turn failure into success. Often with surprising speed, talents, ability and a more magnetic personality are developed.

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"It's not my trouble; it's going to be his! He had the gall to tell me that the freight charges on my sawmill parts were eight hundred dollars!"

"It's a long haul," said Blaird dryly.

"Long haul?" cried the youth. "You knew how long it was when you contracted to do it for a hundred and a quarter!"

Blaird's stare remained constant. "Read your contract over again. Third paragraph from the bottom says, 'If unusual conditions are encountered, a suitable revision of the rate will be made.' "

The boy began a furious protest, then stopped abruptly. He said softly, "So that's the game!"

"If you can't raise the eight hundred," Blaird drawled, "we could likely work out a mortgage to cover it."

"Why, sure—unusual," the boy said. "I forgot about that." The gentleness of his tone didn't jibe with the iron set of his jaw. "Nothing like a jolt of unusual to make a fool of a man."

He wheeled around and stamped out. The ring of his boots had a purposeful sound that didn't escape Cass Blaird, and the owner of Bent Hump slithered from behind the desk like a spider.

He ignored the Deacon as completely as if he hadn't existed and the Deacon, still angry, strode after him.

The blond youth had disappeared when he got outside, but Blaird's scuttling figure was ahead of him. Just beyond was a vacant lot which served as a wagon yard and into which the freighter had pulled. Bordering it was a loading platform and a rickety warehouse.

The boy had sprung up to the loading platform. He put his fingers to his mouth and whistled. Half a block away a light wagon moved away from the tie rail.

"That sawmill stuff comes first," the boy called pleasantly to the driver and agent, who between them had worked loose the tarps covering the load.

The agent was a stumpy, surly man with hairy forearms and a broken-down eyeshade. "You get a slip from Blaird?" he demanded.

"Don't need one." The young fellow jumped expertly to the top of the load. "There's my stuff. Right handy. Yank it out."

The driver, Zeke, straightened with a scowl. "No slip, no freight!"

"Ordinarily, maybe. Blaird said this was unusual. Makes a difference, you know." The boy got hold of one end of a crate, heaved it up.

"You there, Sam Ross!" blatted the agent. "Get off there!"

The driver said nothing. He sprang like a cat for the hind wagon. The boy had expected it, but not quite so soon. He was turning when the driver's sledge-hammer fist exploded against the side of his head.

Within an ace of being spilled off the load, he caught himself. His right ear was twice as big as it had been a moment before, but he came up grinning.

The driver rushed at him again with a growl, while the agent scrambled over the high side of the wagon.

For five seconds it was close and rough work, with the boy collecting punishment and dealing it back with interest. One of his boots took the agent in the belly, knocked him like a gasping fish to the platform.

He absorbed two jolting rights to the jaw, shook his head and began whipping the driver with both fists. Four of those solid smashes were enough. The driver went off the wagon, landing soddenly on his shoulder and lying still.

★

DEACON BOTTLE heard the click of a revolver being cocked. He had forgotten Blaird, who stood a pace or two in front of him and a little to one side.

The picture and its implications flashed instantly across his mind, and the Deacon moved automatically.

Within reach was the scrawny Blaird, gun swinging up. He had called no warning, so he meant to use it.

Up on the wagon the boy's blond head swung around. The grim set of his face told that he saw Blaird, knew what was going to happen, knew there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

The Deacon's arm swung, with a silver-mounted sixgun at the end of it. The barrel struck bone just as Blaird's revolver exploded. Cass Blaird sagged into the dirt.

The wagon which had pulled away from the tie rail came rattling into the lot. A girl was driving it. She wore a man's overalls and a wide-brimmed hat, and all the Deacon got was a glimpse of sorrel-colored hair and long-lashed eyes under which dust was streaked.

Deacon Bottle had to pull Blaird out of the way, carry him over and prop him up against the warehouse. Though unconscious, Cass Blaird was still breathing.

The blond youth, Sam Ross, had gone to work at once digging his crates out of the load. The twelve-foot tumbling shaft was more than he could handle alone. He heaved up one end of it, but that was all he could manage. He didn't ask for help, just stood there straining with it.

The girl jumped down from the wagon's seat.

Deacon Bottle growled to her, "Stay where you are, girl, an' keep that team steady."

He heaved himself up the side of the freight wagon, got the brawny bulk of his shoulder under the opposite end of the shaft.

They eased it down into the bed of the wagon and lowered the crated gears and the six-foot circular saw on top of it.

The agent was staggering helplessly to his feet as Ross said hoarsely, "That's it! Some day, mister, I'll be able to thank you right. We won't forget, neither of us . . . I'll take those lines, Sue."

He started to clamber over into the seat. He didn't quite make it.

Deacon Bottle saw his face go pale with pain striking across it, saw for the first time the strain of blood on his shirt. The boy sank to his knees, gripping the back of the seat hard.

Shocked alarm came into the girl's eyes. She uttered a low cry of desperation.

Deacon Bottle swore and threw a quick look at Blaird. Blaird was beginning to stir. That slug he had shaken so hastily out of his gun hadn't been wasted.

The Deacon put one foot on the wheel. "Get in behind there," he said to the girl, "and stop that bleeding. Where does this stuff go?"

The girl gave him a swift scrutiny, and the Deacon was grateful that she wasn't hysterical.

"West of here," she said, "about four miles."

Deacon Bottle settled his frock-coated bulk in the seat, slapped his team with the lines. The harness creaked with their forward lurch, and the wagon rolled in a circle out of the yard. The Deacon didn't look back; he figured that if Cass Blaird came to in time, he would hear the bullet.

Stopping to tie the buckskin behind was the work of a moment. Then the wagon ground around the hook in the street, and up the sloping grade out of town.

The high North Hills tumbled upward on either hand, and as the wagon crawled into them Deacon Bottle had time to growl at himself for being a sentimental old fool.

A man couldn't hope to right every item of injustice he stumbled across. The troubles of two youngsters were none of his concern. Still, they had the kind of courage he liked to see, and he had promised himself that one way or another Bent

Hump was going to get the preachment somebody had asked for.

CHAPTER TWO

Long-Armed Marshal

THE town dropped into a fold in the hills, and Deacon Bottle heaved up a sigh of relief.

With his wound bound, the boy was sitting up, much embarrassed that the fight, the work and a bullet through the muscle of his chest had knocked him off his feet.

He was a clean-featured young fellow with a film of golden beard along the line of his jaw. The girl, Sue Ross, he explained, was his wife. They had been married a little over a year. He had learned his lumbering in Maine and had come west to the frontier to set up in the game for himself.

He grinned a little shyly. "Ever see lumber you've cut go into a house, Deacon? It was you took the tree down—gave it that last tap an' watched it hit like all hell had busted loose. Looks dead, but it ain't. You hook a chain to it and snake it out of the brush. Then you saw it up—planks and two-by-fours and foundation beams. When the house goes up you feel like maybe a little bit of it's yours."

"How'd you happen to pick here?" the Deacon wanted to know.

Ross nodded toward the ridge which loomed on their left. "Couple years from now there'll be a sizeable town over yonder. Folks have started coming in already. When the railroad hit Pinnacle Junction, it gave this whole country a decent outlet."

Deacon Bottle clucked to his horses. "Where does Blaird fit it?"

Ross shook his head. "Sawmill proposition looks good to him, I guess, and he wants to horn in on it."

"It's more than that," Sue Ross said suddenly. "He doesn't want new people to get started here. He won't help the settlers; he's done everything he can to run them out."

"The more settlers, the more money he'd make, seems like," the Deacon objected mildly.

He was interrupted by the slashing of a nearly spent bullet among the branches of the pines which lined the road. As the Deacon pulled his head around he remembered that in timbered country sound is quickly lost.

Three riders were quirting their ponies hard from the direction of Bent Hump, and one of them had gambled a long rifle shot.

"Blaird's a marshal, not a sheriff," the Deacon growled. "Startin' a fight outside of town puts him wrong."

"This town's different," Sam Ross said. "Blaird fixed it so he's got the whip hand. The legal limits run out close to three miles."

"Then we ain't past 'em."

"That's right. More'n a mile yet to go."

Deacon Bottle started to let his whip run out, and checked it. Between the load and the rutted road his team was doing all it could be expected to do.

Behind them the rifle opened up again, closer this time. That mile wasn't going to be made.

Deacon Bottle looked around at the boy. "Son," he said, "this Blaird has got the law and you've got a wife. Maybe the best idea is to hang back an' go at this different. Those freight charges won't hold up in court."

"That's what Blaird wants," Ross said angrily. "Any kind of delay busts me. A court fight would, for sure. I bought my timber on speculation. Got this sawmill rig by showing the lumber contracts the settlers gave me. They're waitin' on me. Waited too long now, I reckon. They'll freeze out this winter if I can't make good."

Deacon Bottle scowled. This was a little worse than he had figured.

The boy's voice had a hoarse ring as he added, "So I got to make a fight of it. No choice, with folks depending on me. If there's lawing to be done, it'll have to be done later."

That was right. Deacon Bottle had skirted the law too many times not to understand it. What was done was done, and the law never caught up with all of it.

"Got any kind of a rifle?" he asked abruptly.

It was the girl who dug a Winchester out of the wagon bed. "It isn't your fight," she said. "It's Sam's and mine. I've used a gun before."

The Deacon grinned. "So have I. Your job right now is to get Sam and this rig of yours out where Blaird can't touch you. I don't have to stay in this country, and you do."

He took the rifle, surrendering to the girl one of his silver-mounted sixguns. "Hang onto this, just in case. Where is ths layout of yours?"

"A mile and a half to Spruce Canyon. Follow the wheel tracks cutting north."

"All right. I'll get the gun back to you. I don't like bucking rifles with a short gun."

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DEACON BOTTLE handed the lines to the girl, who had clambered over the seat. About to jump to the ground, he bent a glance on Sam Ross.

"Know anybody around here named Ed Moran?"

"Never heard of him," the boy said. "Far as I know—"

The Deacon jumped and the wagon rattled on along the uneven road. The Deacon had done enough hill fighting to know that to keep his horse would be to lose it. In rough country a man was better off afoot.

Without haste he took cover behind a log at the side of the road. Using it for a rest, he dropped a bullet thirty feet in front of the racing horsemen.

The three hauled up in a hurry, scattering into the trees.

Almost at once a chattering fusillade broke loose, and lead began to chip away at the log. Somebody in that trio could shoot.

The Deacon hadn't regarded this as a serious fight. His intention had been simply to delay pursuit until the Rosses and their wagon could get beyond Cass Blaird's jurisdiction. He had expected this semi-posse to recognize that its mission had failed and retire, however unwillingly, after a face-saving blast at him.

Five minutes told him, in a particularly deadly way, that he was wrong.

From the higher ground north of the road a rifle cracked briskly. The bullet raked coat, vest, shirt and skin across his shoulder blades. Had the gunman allowed for the drop in elevation, it would have taken him through the heart.

The Deacon lunged like a bullet-stung wolf, selecting his course automatically. He had never in his adult life gone into a fight without debating the terrain and his chances beforehand.

Operating behind the screen of pines, the trio had boxed him neatly, moving with the planned rapidity of killers. They had him cornered and under rifle sights, but there had been no invitation for him to surrender. Their one and only intention was to wipe him out. Keeping to shelter would only drive him deeper into a suicidal pocket.

He jumped now in the only direction which could give him the slim advantage of surprise—into the open.

For perhaps two seconds he was a clear target crossing to the south side of the road.

Behind him a second slug from the murder gun churned dirt where he had lain. The rifleman down the road opened up with belated accuracy, the bullet caroming off the bone of Deacon Bottle's left wrist and numbing it.

He dropped, like a man hit and spun by the shock, but he was in timber again.

He had no more than a minute or two before they would shift to cover him anew, and he made the most of that time. A dozen yards he scrambled, with the brush for cover. Then he was up and running.

A low, stony ridge rose among the pines. He slid through a break in the rocks, following the ridge eastward for perhaps an eighth of a mile. There he crawled to the top for a cautious look.

Only one of the three men was in sight—a stringy, pinched-faced fellow whom the Deacon had never seen before. He was coming along through the trees which flanked the road, riding at a careful walk, a gun cocked across his saddlehorn.

There was a certain deadly relentlessness about the way he advanced toward the spot where the Deacon, presumably hard hit, had fallen. He was a hunter moving in to finish his kill.

Neither of the other two was in sight. He rejected the possibility that they had gone on after the Ross wagon. He would have heard them on the road; they would only lose time trying to cut across country.

He had been fooled once, and didn't propose to be taken in again. For a reason the Deacon couldn't define, they were after his life; Sam Ross's two-bit sawmill no longer mattered.

He pondered that briefly. If they wanted to make sure of him they would move at once for strategic points which would bottle him up in this particular section of the hills.

One of those points, he guessed, was apt to be Spruce Canyon of which the girl had spoken.

He slid back off the ridge tip. If it was to be a race then, he had better get started.

It was a mile and a half, the girl had said, to the canyon. It took the Deacon a little better than an hour to reach it. Here the hills turned abruptly rugged, pinching together to make the slash through which the road ran.

Deacon Bottle lay on his belly among the rocks, which the sun had transformed into blistering stove lids. He squinted once at the sky. There was still too much daylight; he couldn't afford to wait for dark.

A lingering trace of dust lay in the air which no breeze had stirred.

Deacon Bottle swore softly. So he was late; somewhere in the rocky notch a gunman lay waiting for him.

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THE Deacon studied the tumbled cliffs flanking the road. In any one of a dozen crevices the ambusher might be lodged.

Deliberately he slid the Winchester out in front of him. His black frock coat he stripped off and wadded into a bundle behind the stock. Searching eyes from the direction of the canyon would sooner or later pick up the jutting gun barrel, would drive a slug at the barely visible black lump.

Sweating, Deacon Bottle crawled for the cliffs which rose in ragged tiers. He made it a foot at a time, utilizing every scrap of cover. The sun scorched his back; the angle at the foot of the sloping cliffs was a sweltering pocket.

He got up to the first ledge, lay there for a time, wriggled on to the next.

Doubt began to take hold of him. That smell of dust—a stray puff of wind might have caused that. A gunman coming along the road would have him cold, like a target on a stick. In spite of the heat a

chill ran along his backbone. He had been a fool to gamble that—

Above him a gun blasted. It was close, no more than a dozen feet away, and the sound was picked up and redoubled in the narrow throat of the canyon.

Deacon Bottle leaned in close, holding his breath.

Twice more the gun racketed. Deacon Bottle got his legs up under him, ready to move. Boots scraped over his head. He had expected more caution on the part of the ambusher. He had no way of knowing that the shot had been such a pretty one a miss was inconceivable.

Deacon Bottle's startled gaze, lifting, saw the man in mid-air above him. He had started the eight-foot jump down to the ledge occupied by Deacon Bottle, and it was too late to stop. A look of amazement and rage flashed across his bearded face.

The Deacon tried to dodge, and didn't quite make it. The gunman's boots crashed into his side, slammed him sprawling.

He had clawed for his short gun; with the breath knocked out of him he couldn't use it.

They rolled together, scrambling and driving on the narrow shelf. A fist cracked hard against the Deacon's jaw. He felt himself going and gripped the front of the man's coat with his left hand. They dropped together; it was luck that the Deacon landed uppermost.

Under the impact of that whiskey-keg bulk, the gunman groaned and lay utterly limp, his eyes closed.

Panting, the Deacon got to his feet. The fellow was a stranger to him. He had a lean wolf's jaw with a ragged fringe of cinnamon beard. Deacon Bottle took the rifle which had come down with him and slung it as far away into the rocks as he could. His bullet-grazed wrist was stiff and sore.

He got back to the Winchester and his bullet-riddled coat, after sweeping the hills and the road leading toward Bent Hump. Nobody in sight, but there would be soon.

He headed on through the canyon. Two or three hundred yards beyond it he found the wheel ruts breaking away northward.

It was just turning dusk when he came out on a little clearing. He got a glimpse of fallen logs, the wagon and a tent when a voice called, "Stop right there!"

It was Sue Ross, and she had his revolver leveled across a log.

The Deacon chuckled. "Nice goin'. See you made it right enough." The girl came toward him, and the expression on her face made him ask, abruptly concerned, "What's wrong?"

The girl nodded toward her husband, and the Deacon went over there. Sam Ross had most of the crates out of the wagon; some of them were opened. He was running a hand through rumpled blond hair.

"Licked," he said bitterly. "I should have known Blaird wouldn't take chances on not collecting."

"How do you mean?"

"He held out the gear that hooks up my tumbling shaft to the capstan. I got a saw but I can't turn it."

Deacon Bottle rubbed at his jaw. "Sure it wasn't on the load, and' you missed it?"

"I'll swear I didn't. It was on the waybill, but it wasn't on that load."

"Smart, that Blaird," the Deacon conceded. "Where do you reckon it is?"

"In his warehouse at Pinnacle Junction, most likely. He held it out on purpose, till he got his money or his mortgage."

"Might be I could pick it up for you," said the Deacon. "I been shot at in a pretty serious way, and I'm gettin' disturbed about it. How far is this junction?"

"Twenty miles or so by the road. Fourteen if you don't mind a little rough going over the shortcut. I'll trail along."

The Deacon shook his head. "You don't leave a hundred bucks lyin' around while you hunt for five. Your stake's here; stick an' hang onto it."

Sue Ross stepped close to him. There was something about her long-lashed eyes and sorrel hair that put warmth into his heart.

"Sam's hurt," she said. "He can't go, but I can. Our stake isn't as important as backing you. If there's trouble—"

Deacon Bottle smiled at her. "Ma'am, I've been in trouble before. I'm going alone. But I'd like to eat before I leave."

CHAPTER THREE

Pinnacle Junction Grief

DEACON BOTTLE reached Pinnacle Junction a little after midnight. It was merely a station and siding set in the worst of tumbled badlands. The grade eastward was a bad one, and when traffic or weather demanded, cars were held for days or a week on the siding.

Aside from the station, there was only a saloon and the Blaird warehouse.

Deacon Bottle ground-tied his buckskin in a ravine on the outskirts and went warily on foot to the station.

The night operator, a lanky, buck-toothed man, was dozing in front of his desk. He knew the Deacon and gaped at him. "How in hell did you get up here?"

"Got a preachment to get off my hands in Bent Hump," the Deacon told him amiably. "I want to talk to Mallory in Latigo. Can you roust him out for me?"

The buck-toothed operator looked sober. Lon Mallory was superintendent of the hills division, and this was two o'clock in the morning.

"You sure it's important?"

"Hard telling," said the Deacon. "You get him. I'll take the blame if he don't like it."

The operator rattled his key, and for half an hour the Deacon fidgeted while a hunt for Superintendent Mallory was started in Latigo.

The operator shook his head, finally. "They think he's in a poker game somewhere, but they can't find him."

Deacon Bottle picked up his hat. "Tell 'em to keep tryin'."

"You sure it's all right? What'll I tell him?"

"Ask him if the railroad'll back me in case I get into a jackpot. He fired me just 'fore I pulled out of Latigo."

"Fired you?" the operator yelled. "Living thunder! And at two in the morning you're—"

"A chore he had in mind that I didn't have time for," the Deacon explained. "You ask him." And he shut the door behind him.

It was still dark, but the Deacon was hunting trouble and he saw what might have been a man or a shadow moving in front of Blaird's warehouse. Though he watched the spot steadily for several minutes, there was nothing more.

The faint clicking sound could have been a door shutting or any one of a hundred slight night noises.

Deacon Bottle tramped toward the warehouse. The nearer end was an office of sorts. The door was locked. He rapped at it smartly.

After a short pause a lamp flared up inside, loose floor boards creaked, the bolt clicked back.

The door was opened a crack and the lamp lifted. Behind it Deacon Bottle saw a wrinkled face with close-set, mean little eyes.

"What's wanted, mister?"

"Freight," said the Deacon, and pushed the door with a big left hand. His right was where he could use it in a hurry.

The freight clerk had to step back or be knocked down by the door. He looked angry, but Deacon Bottle had the notion that he was trying to. Another expression lay under the wrath. He was fully dressed.

"Sleep in your clothes?" asked the Deacon cheerfully.

"I been up checkin' bills." The agent was sullen about it. "Who in hell are you?"

"Deacon Bottle's my name. I'm supposed to pick up a gear, part of a portable sawmill, that was left here by mistake, I think."

The agent nodded. "Sure, I remember that. It was an accident, leavin' it off. Didn't make you any trouble, did it, son?"

"Not to speak of."

The Deacon's mild blue eyes were roaming the office. It was a bare, neglected hole, furnished with a dilapidated counter, a desk and a pair of chairs.

The gaudy tops of a pair of candy boxes had been cut out and tacked to a wall. There was a door at the back, leading probably into the storeroom. No place in here for a man to hide unless he was crouching behind the counter. Deacon Bottle maneuvered himself into a position to check on that.

"Maybe you'd like to pick it up now?" the agent suggested.

"Can I?"

"Just as sure as you're standin' there. Come along." The agent's voice held a heartiness that didn't go with that undertone of meanness in his eyes. He wasn't accustomed to doing favors, big or little, with pleasure.

He set the lamp on the counter, went around it toward the door at the back, Deacon Bottle following.

He put his hand on the knob. The Deacon watched his feet. He shifted them so that he could swing back the door and leave Deacon Bottle standing in the opening.

He didn't quite finish moving his feet. The muzzle of the Deacon's silver-mounted sixgun was in the small of his back.

The Deacon said, very quietly, "You first."

The man's head snapped around, and the look of startled terror which sprang across his face was proof enough of his intention. He gasped, "Why, I— I—"

"Go ahead an' open it!"

Hatred and fright made the agent's lips tremble, but he couldn't get any words out.

Grimly, because he had had all he wanted of these murder traps, Deacon Bottle reached for the knob with his left hand. He flung the door open quickly, and for that instant the agent was alone with the light behind him so his face couldn't be seen.

He started to jerk out of the way, but was too late. A gun clamored with a hollow booming from the interior of the warehouse. The agent groaned and tottered into a heap across the threshold.

Deacon Bottle leaped past him before he had finished falling, the memory of that orange muzzle burst's position keen in his mind. He was shooting as he leaped for the sheltering gloom inside, lacing the

SURRENDER, HELL! WE JUST GOT HERE!

Not one of us can recall those immortal words without a thrill of pride. But thrilling as they are, it's our job to back them—and the boys who are fighting today—with the tools that will win the war! War-Savings Bonds and Stamps Will Help! Buy Them Every Pay-Day!

area of ambush with hot, singing lead.

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EARS ringing, he stopped with a safety slug under the hammer. Stopped and listened. He heard the movement of cloth and leather against boards. No gunman holding his fire for a death shot would stir so. It was the convulsive jerking of a dying man.

Deacon Bottle went back into the office for the lamp. By the time he got back with it the man lying at the far end of the warehouse was dead.

He was the cinnamon-bearded gunman who had set the earlier ambush in Spruce Canyon.

Holding the lamp over his head, Deacon Bottle toured the nearly empty warehouse. He explored the stacks of boxes and barreled flour, but he couldn't find what he was hunting for.

There was no sign of the gear, or anything that resembled one.

He knelt beside the agent and turned him over. The bullet intended for Deacon Bottle had plowed through his chest, and there was blood around his mouth. His eyes were open and vacant; he breathed with great difficulty, in labored bursts.

"That gear," said Deacon Bottle, close to the man's ear. "Where it is?"

The agent's stare remained vacant.

"That gear!" the Deacon repeated. "For the sawmill!"

"Loaded it up—tonight," the agent whispered.

"Loaded it? For a night run? Why a night run?"

"Had to—had to move—"

The agent's breath rattled in his throat. A shudder racked its way through him and the last spark of life left his staring eyes.

Deacon Bottle got up and found the buck-toothed railroad man gaping at him. "That you doin' the shooting?"

"Part of it," the Deacon said. "Did you get Mallory?"

The operator shook his head in a dazed way. He was staring at the Deacon's bullet-riddled frock coat, which he had noticed for the first time.

"Doll rags!" he choked. "Man, you're shot plumb to—"

"Hide's too tough," reported the Deacon cheerfully. "Leaves black-and-blue spots, is all. Find Mallory and tell him I'm in that jackpot, will you? I'm in a hurry."

He left the operator with a jaw that had frozen open, and went out, swearing to himself.

He went at a ponderous run for the buckskin in the ravine. While he had been approaching Pinnacle Junction by way of the shortcut, the freight wagons had been rolling toward Bent Hump on the main road.

How far along the outfit had got, there was no way of telling. If he didn't overhaul it before it got to Bent Hump, there would be hell to pay.

The buckskin was still where he had left him. With an agility his size didn't suggest, the Deacon swung up. The buckskin was a traveler, but Bent Hump was a long haul. The Deacon let the animal walk out his stiffness, then put him into an ambling trot.

He had nearly two hours, he reckoned, before daylight. It wasn't likely they would want the rig to hit the town much after that. All he could do was get out every yard of ground there was in the buckskin without killing him.

Fretting, Deacon Bottle watched the timbered hills roll tediously behind him. Hoofbeats clopped regularly, drumming away into the sound-muffling timber.

He didn't want daylight to come, but behind him the eastern sky grew gray. He could smell the dust turned up by big, iron-tired wheels now. It was faint, but it was there.

The night had been whittled down to soft shadows when the buckskin's hoofs clattered in the stony gut of Spruce Canyon. He was a dark leather color from sweat, and foam fell back from his jaws against the Deacon's knees.

Deacon Bottle was holding his bruised left wrist with his right hand and manipulating it gently. He figured he could use it if he had to.

He could see the deep wheel marks in the road. At intervals they were marred by the print of shod hoofs. That meant a rider was between him and the wagons.

Sorting out facts in his mind, Deacon Bottle wondered if he was going to have a rear guard to deal with too.

Worry was building up in him. Worry that he wasn't going to be in time. They were pulling close to Bent Hump. The long grade running down into the town lay less than a mile ahead.

Then he saw the wagons. The second of the pair pulled across a rise and vanished into a slowly boiling cloud of dust which sparkled and flamed with the sun's first rays. At a word from the Deacon the buckskin's flagging pace quickened.

Minutes later the intervening rider came into view, tackled the rise, dropped out of sight on the other side.

He was too far off to be recognized.

The dragging time was endless, but all Deacon Bottle could do was wait. The buckskin heaved as he hit the slope; he kept at it doggedly, and topped the crest with his flanks going like bellows.

The wagons were rolling toward the long incline, and the rider had pulled alongside the driver who was astride the near wheeler.

The Deacon swore helplessly, jerked out a gun and threw two futile shots toward the freighter.

The rider wasn't a man. It was Sue Ross, and she had the Winchester across her lap. She had spoken to the driver, and lifted the gun, and he had struck savagely at her with the loaded butt of his whip.

Deacon Bottle saw the Winchester spin out of her hands as she reeled from the horse's back—it was a bay, one of the team which had pulled the Ross wagon, and she was riding bareback. She lay crumpled in the road as the wagons rocked ahead and her horse turned back toward the Deacon.

Heavy brakes began their shrill squalling.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sixgun Jackpot

DEACON BOTTLE leaned out of the saddle, crowding the bay to the side of the road, and caught its bridle.

Coming up to where the girl lay, he sprang down and looped the reins over the buckskin's horn. Sue Ross's eyes opened as he lifted her. He looked for blood, and didn't see any.

She struggled against his arm. "I'm—all right, Deacon. He didn't hit me. I fell—trying to dodge."

The Deacon growled, "What kind of a stunt were you up to?"

"He's got the gear, hasn't he?" Sue Ross was sitting up. "I got to thinking, after you left, that they might move it this way. So I came out to stop him if he came by."

"Where was Sam?" demanded the Deacon angrily.

"He was asleep. I left without telling him."

"All right," the Deacon said. "Ride back an' tell him he'll get his gear this morning or not at all." He stepped quickly into the buckskin's saddle, squinting ahead at the lumbering freight wagons. They had to be stopped and stopped fast. "Think you can make it?"

"I think so." She was on her feet, leaning against the bay's shoulder.

Deacon Bottle nodded at her, counting the seconds he had before the freighter would hit the grade leading into Bent Hump. There weren't very many.

The buckskin stirred under his spurs, lifted into a staggering gallop.

Up ahead Deacon Bottle saw the driver pull himself from the wheeler's saddle up onto the load, the swing team's driving lines in his teeth.

He had a revolver in his right hand. He threw down with it, and Deacon Bottle saw the spout of flame.

Fully angry, the Deacon lifted his own gun, bad though the target was. The buckskin, about done in, was staggering; the wagons rocked and jolted unpredictably.

The Deacon's first slug tore canvas within six inches of the driver, who had dropped to one knee. The second ripped the sleeve from his wrist. That was close enough for the driver, who had emptied his gun without result. He tossed one wild look over his shoulder toward the town; the prospect must have looked bad, for he went in a sprawling jump over the side of the wagon.

Landing on all fours, he scrambled up and dove headlong into the brush that lined the road.

Grimly, hating to, the Deacon used his spurs again. If he hadn't had the evidence of his eyes, the rising whine of the wheels would have testified to the plight of the wagons.

The buckskin summoned a last spurt from its reservoir of energy, pulled up inch by inch.

Deacon Bottle's blue eyes weren't mild any more. He was past the tandem wagon. The lead rig was a lurching, reeling shape at his right elbow. So close he could touch it was the big wheel gouging at the ruts. The clamor of hoof and wheel was a surging roar in his ears.

He stood up in the stirrups—trying not to think what would happen if he missed—and lunged for the side of the wagon.

There was a moment of empty-bellied doubt, then his pudgy fingers were hooked over the side. He pulled himself up, feeling the sweat which had sprung out all over him.

He stood up, feet braced apart. He could see the town now. It was so close it startled him. A wheel slammed into a rut, slammed out of it; the groaning wagons came within an ace of upsetting.

Deacon Bottle put all his weight against the long oak brake pole. The heavy shoes, screaming, clamped against iron. They began to smoke.

The ten-horse team had lengthened into a run to stay ahead of the rocketing wagons. The thunder of their flying hoofs was a ragged, battering wave of sound; and through it, like a knife, pentrated the shriek of the brakes.

The momentum was tremendous. It was more than the brakes could hold. They might—just might—keep the heavy wagons on the road, keep them from running down the team, but they couldn't stop them.

That knowledge sank home in Deacon Bottle. The town already seemed so close that roaring into it was a matter of seconds.

The hook in the street looked like a blank wall.

★

THE racket of the rolling rigs on the grade had reached the town, and men stood frozen on the walks. Then, as if hit by a common impulse, they began to move with jerky, frantic steps.

Muscles aching as he held his grip on the brake pole, Deacon Bottle told himself it was time to jump. He had done what he could; he couldn't be blamed if it wasn't enough. The thing to do was jump and save his skin.

He thought of the horses, all ten, piled up there in the curve.

Maybe another ounce or two on the brake pole—the street did level out a little when it reached the first buildings.

The breath was being knocked back down the Deacon's throat. Deacon Bottle hung on. He knew he had to give those horses a fighting chance to get around the corner.

Sue and Sam Ross—well— The Deacon looked back over his shoulder. Looked and swore. Instead of going back, the girl had followed him. With the Winchester across her lap, she was urging the bay at a breakneck gallop down the grade.

A rocking jar almost threw the Deacon off his feet. Righting himself, he saw the wink of flame from the window of that jutting corner building.

The muscles of his arms cramped with the understanding of what that meant. It was the window in Blaird's cubbyhole office. Using the sill for a rest, Cass Blaird could pick him off like a rabbit.

The rifle spat again. The bullet tore splinters from the brake pole.

Never had Deacon Bottle wanted a gun more; never had there been less hope of using one. His time was already calculated to split seconds. At the proper instant, no sooner, he had to leave the brake and snatch for the swing team's driving lines which the freighter had hooked to the front of the wagon. Without them there would be no chance at all of getting around the corner.

Deacon Bottle felt the tear of a slug between his body and his left arm, felt the warm flow of blood. He didn't move. He had chosen the point at which the change must be made. His eyes were glued to it.

Very faintly he heard an explosion behind him. Only later was he able to guess that Sue Ross had stopped and was shooting at the cubbyhole window to cover him.

The bend in the street was rushing at him. Buildings on either hand magnified the blaring clangor of hoofs and wheels.

That jutting corner building towered over him. Deacon Bottle jumped for the driving lines. Those last few ounces, those last seconds of pressure, had counted.

The leaders were already turning. Too late to stop that now. With a grip of stone Deacon Bottle held his swing team in a straight line. Held them there until it was time to swing them.

It was a good job, considering. Anything short of disaster was perfection.

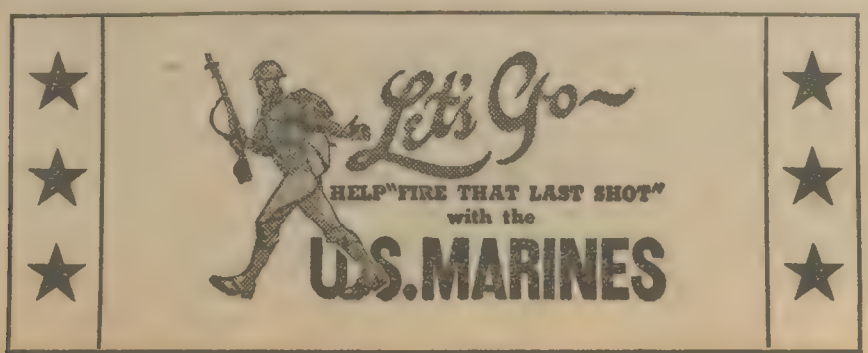
The great hind wheel of the tandem wagon went across the walk, crushing it like a match box. The same wheel crashed into the corner post, tore the whole back out of the cubbyhole, rambled on.

The horses had come back across the chain. The wagons were slowing.

Only then did Deacon Bottle jump.

He rolled over on his face in the choking dust, and got up with a silver-mounted sixgun in each pudgy fist. He started back toward the gaping wreck of the corner building.

Cass Blaird was there. He had jumped



for the safety of the saloon a second too late. A flying board had slashed his forehead so that blood streamed down his face, but he still had his rifle. He was down on one knee with it, pumping lead at Deacon Bottle.

The Deacon's right-hand gun jumped in his fist. No man alive knew more about what a shot gun could do than he. He was very careful with his second shot, which was a long one, and Cass Blaird took two stumbling steps toward him before collapsing.

From the wreckage behind the fallen Blaird another gun blasted. The horse-jawed bartender had thrust a shotgun through the broken wall.

Someone yelled. Deacon Bottle saw the blond Sam Ross come charging around the corner on foot. He had the Winchester his wife had used, and he began to throw bullets into the saloon.

The Deacon had already decided to gamble with that danger. He had pulled around toward the improvised wagon yard on his right where Zeke and the hairy-armed agent with the dilapidated eyeshade had elected to pitch into the fight.

Zeke had sprung down from the loading platform and was running toward the street.

The Deacon's sudden wheel caught him in the open. He flung his gun up with a curse, but the shot was hasty.

The Deacon's bullet shocked him like a bucket of icy water. He stopped in his tracks, the fury draining out of his face, looking down stupidly at his chest. He fell without raising his eyes.

Up on the loading platform the stumpy agent had made a half-hearted endeavor to cover his comrade. His bullet had flown wide, and now as the Deacon stalked toward him he whipped the revolver out into the dirt as if it had scorched his fingers.

"I'm through," he yelled hoarsely. "I'm through, I tell you!"

The Deacon motioned with his gun barrel. "Jump down," he invited, "if you figure your tongue is loose enough to answer some questions. If it ain't, we'll finish this now."

Sam Ross came striding in from the street, his face flushed. "You all right, Deacon? That barkeep's done his last bushwhacking."

Deacon Bottle chuckled. "Fair to middlin', son. You showed up at about the right time. Where'd you come from?"

"When I woke up and found Sue gone," the boy said shame-facedly, "I lit out after her. Caught up with her on the grade. I took the gun from her and came jumping on in."

The Deacon nodded appreciatively. "Your gear's there with those wagons, wherever they are. Better hunt 'em up. You might take a look at the rest of the load, while you're at it. I've got a hunch it's barreled whiskey."

*

THE next two hours were busy ones. Deacon Bottle let the agent spend thirty minutes telling him a story he already knew or had half guessed. Sam Ross returned with the team and wagons intact, and a crew was recruited to transfer the illicit load to the warehouse for safe-keeping.

A rider was dispatched to Pinnacle Junction with a message for Lon Mallory. "Got a line on your whiskey," Deacon Bottle wrote. "Job still unfinished. Am I on the payroll or not?"

A wagon was rounded up for the transporting of the missing sawmill parts, and in it the Rosses and Deacon Bottle rambled up the slope out of Bent Hump.

Each pocket of the Deacon's frock coat held a quart of Old Pepper.

"When Blaird came out so dead set against a preachment," he explained, "I suspicioned somethin' wrong. Mostly,

folks are right eager to hear 'em. He knew I'd done some railroad work, I reckon, and figured I was here to check on the thievin' he'd been up to. . . . How's that bullet cut of yours, son?"

"Wouldn't know I had it," Sam Ross said. "You didn't tackle all this grief just so you could give a preachment, did you?"

The Deacon grinned. "I'm not sayin' I wouldn't have. Still, there was something else queer—Blaird's not wantin' to help out settlers. The agent filled that part of the story out. Seems Blaird's been running a high-handed game up here. Stealing from the railroad, with some rustling and high-grading on the side. Had the freight outfit to handle those jobs, you see. If the country settled up, it'd get too hot for him. And he wouldn't be able to run things. That counted too."

"But you didn't guess about the whiskey," Sam Ross insisted.

"Not for sure," the Deacon admitted, "until I found out about the night run being made from Pinnacle Junction. That clinched it."

Deacon Bottle settled back in the seat. "Only thing that's left," he remarked, "is to locate this Ed Moran so I can arrange about the preachment." He let his innocent blue eyes wander toward Sue Ross.

She flushed. "You knew," she accused. "You knew all along that I wrote that letter."

"No. No, I didn't. But somebody appeared to want me pretty bad. Generally, I'm sorry to say, when folks ask for a preachment they need gun help about as bad as they do the preachment. Far as I could see, you or Sam here fitted that pretty well."

"You'll have your preachment," Sue Ross said defiantly, "and you'll have an audience. I'll get every woman in the settlement to come over and hear you."

The Deacon looked startled. His preaching had been done in saloons, to men.

"I'll tell them," the girl continued soberly, "if they smell whiskey it's because some was used as a disinfectant."

The Deacon's round, moonlike face beamed. "Might be," he declared, "we could work it out on that basis."

THE END

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THE CIRCLE A INVASION

He flung himself at the only man who was mounted. . . .

What strange, deep-laid scheme was behind the kidnaping of young Dayton Fant from the night-shrouded ranch house, when masked men led him, gagged and bound, to a hidden cave, and there presented him with the fifteen hundred dollars in gold for which his dad had been murdered. . . ?

CHAPTER ONE

Gun-Prodigal's Home-Coming

BACK yonder, when Dayton Fant was a patch-seated kid, his dad, Little Sam Fant, used to tell him: "Son, it'd pride me a heap if you'd learn

By Fred Gipson

to keep a nose-twist on that temper and use your head more!"

Maybe that's howcome Dayton Fant to hold his temper and use his head that morning when he rode up to the little old shirt-tail home spread and found three gun-hung, hard-case riders decorating the front gallery of the adobe house.

Dayton had been thinking about Little Sam as he rode up. The moment he'd topped the ridge a mile back and sighted the little white-washed house on the bank of the Frio, he'd started remembering how Little Sam used to sit out on the front gallery.

"Just setting and thinking and looking," Little Sam used to explain a bit

sheepishly about this habit of his. "Listening to the locusts whine in the burr-oaks. Smelling the mesquite blooms. Watching the thunderheads stack up in the north and hoping it'll rain. It all makes good sense to me!"

But what didn't make sense to Dayton Fant now was the fact that his shy little old grizzly-faced father had been planted in boothill a week ago.

"Shot down by Sheriff Moss' posse for resisting arrest," mild-mannered Jess Barker, deputy sheriff, had told Dayton Fant back in Sabinal.

Barker had talked with a cynical twist to his mouth. He hadn't been with the party. He didn't know the circumstances or the charges against Little Sam. All he knew was that Little Sam had taken the sheriff to boothill with him, which left Barker rodding the law.

Jess Baker and Dayton Fant had fished together as kids. They'd raided watermelon patches together. They hadn't seen each other in five years now, but either one was still ready to back the other till hell froze over.

"This thing smells, Dayton," Barker had told Fant that morning. "But there's too many loose ends yet. You walk cautious and speak soft for a few days. Let me get my feet planted solid in the sheriff's boots. Then, if we don't jump some coyotes out of cover, we ain't the hunters we used to be!"

Maybe Dayton Fant was thinking about that a little, too, when he found those three strangers resting easy on the front gallery where Little Sam belonged to sit.

Or maybe five years on the dodge, trying to keep out of trouble, teaches a man control.

Anyhow, the black anger that surged through Dayton Fant at the sight of the strangers taking possession of Little Sam's outfit didn't show in the puncher's black eyes or in his tone of voice as he pulled up before the house and greeted the gunmen.

He was swinging down out of his saddle as he said: "Howdy, gents. Which one of you is Fant?"

One of the three, lounging in Little Sam's favorite rawhide-bottom chair, was a squat, red-faced gent who regarded the newcomer with mild curiosity. The second, a skinny, squirrel-mouthed individual, squatted on his spurs at the edge of the gallery and shot quick, suspicious looks at Dayton Fant out of the corners of his eyes. Both waited on the third to answer, as if he were the spokesman.

This one, a tall, big man with a sagging underlip, turned up a bottle of whiskey and drank in great gulps before he drew his shirt sleeve across his mouth and answered.

"None of us is Fant, stranger," he said, eyeing the newcomer over a bottle of whiskey that had once belonged to Little Sam Fant. "The Fants is sort of petered out, you might say," he continued. "The old man stopped lead the other day and the law's had his button on the jump for the last four-five year. This is Three Fish property now."

★

FIVE years ago, Dayton Fant would have lost his head and gone for his gun. Today, his savage rage was cloaked in an easy smile.

"Do tell," he said, approaching with no sign of nervousness. "I'll just take a look and see if an old friend of mine is still hanging around."

That caught them by surprise, as he had figured. They gaped at this big, dark stranger and at his manner while he took a couple of steps to the doorway and felt on the wall inside.

When he turned, he clutched a coiled, braided cow whip in his hand and there was a light of happy anticipation in his eyes.

"Right on the same nail," he marveled.

"Same old piece of rawhide that pa used to bust my tail with for snatching watermelons!"

His hand snaked the long, sinuous whip out across the gallery. The popper cracked like a gunshot. Both seated men leaped to their feet.

Dayton Fant grinned at them and flicked the whip back for another stroke.

"Gents," he remarked easily. "I reckon you've made a mistake. I'm Dayton Fant and this is Fant property. You're welcome to leave now. Any time within the next minute!"

For fully half of that minute the three were paralyzed with utter amazement. Then the big man moved. Fast.

His right hand streaking down and coming up, gun-filled, in one swift, continuous movement.

But he didn't move fast enough. The cow whip cracked again. The big man howled. His gun clattered to the floor as he grasped a bleeding hand.

"That's to learn you about drinking a murdered man's whiskey," said Dayton Fant. Rage was beginning to blaze in his black eyes now. He wheeled on the other two. "You boys want a drink before you go?"

The skinny one still looked at Dayton Fant out of the corners of his eyes. He whimpered softly, as if the whip had already found him. The blocky, red-faced man was still staring, pop-eyed.

"We ain't got no orders to fight!" he said at last.

"Then," said Dayton Fant, "I'd go get them orders. Or stay away from here."

The squat one and the squirrel-mouthed one looked up at the big one, waiting for him to decide. The big one took a quick look at the cow whip. He shivered. Then he led the other two off toward the corrals, where their horses munched hay.

He was swearing softly but viciously as he went.

Dayton Fant couldn't stay inside the house after they had left. For five years he had dreamed of the day when he could come back here and prowl around the old house where he had grown up. But now he couldn't stand it.

Little Sam wasn't there. At the same time, there was too much of Little Sam there. The puncher could feel the old man's presence in every room, in every familiar object he laid a hand on. Yet Little Sam wasn't there and the house was too empty.

It made Dayton Fant nervous and restless. He was tired from his long ride that morning and the long rides he'd made every day for a week, coming home. Nevertheless, he went out and searched the horse trap for a fresh mount. He found one, drove it in and swapped saddles. Then he rode somewhat aimlessly over the little river valley spread, looking to see what sort of a herd Little Sam had left.

He found the herd meager enough. Too meager, in fact. He also found Ace White, owner of the Three Fish brand, riding the joining fence between the two spreads. The fence was badly in need of repair.

It took about all of Dayton Fant's powers of self-control to hide his animosity as he approached the rancher. When he spoke, however, his voice sounded calm and even.

"Howdy, Ace," he greeted. "You aiming to patch up that fence or tear it down?"

Ace White was fifty years old or better. His hair was graying at the temples. He was a banker and a saloon owner in Sabinal, but he was also a man of the range. He had done hard work. But somehow he'd managed to retain that sleek, well-fed, well-dressed appearance of a professional white-collar man. He had a full face and shrewd penetrating eyes.

The eyes were studying Dayton Fant now. "That all depends, Fant," he

evaded. "The boys told me you'd come back."

"Yeah," said the puncher. "Thanks for the welcoming committee. Sorry the boys was in such a hurry to leave!"

The two eyed each other for a long moment.

"Well, Fant," the rancher said abruptly. "I reckon you're out for my hide?"

"Reckon so, Ace," said Dayton Fant.

"But I didn't do the killing," said White.

Dayton Fant rolled a cigarette and lighted up. "It ain't just the killing now, Ace," he said, holding his voice in control. "Pa's gone. If I wiped the whole Three Fish outfit off the map, pa would still be gone. Gunsmoke can't bring him back. Nothing can bring him back. That's why I hate you and your outfit, Ace.

"That's why you don't get pa's little two-bit spread here for tax money. That's why I tore up that court order giving you possession of the Circle A when I stopped at the sheriff's office this morning. You'll get your tax money when I get around to paying you, but you don't get possession of this land. Just remember that—and keep out of my way!"

CHAPTER TWO

Outside the Law!

WITH that, Dayton Fant swung his horse away from the fence and rode off. He didn't trust himself any longer. Ace White, or some of his hirelings, had murdered his father. He was convinced of that. Yet he couldn't prove it. And he'd promised Jess Barker to wait awhile before he cut loose his wolf.

"Your slate's clean now, Dayton," Barker had pled. "When Wild Horse Evers got throwed and kicked to pieces by a jug-head bronc and knowed his time was up, he confessed to shooting the Jeffery kid in that fracas you boys had in the Lucky Lady. That cleared you, like I wrote. But if you go off half-cocked on this deal, before we get evidence that'll stand up in court, you'll have to go on the dodge again. And you don't want that."

Dayton Fant had admitted that he didn't. He still didn't. He was tired of traveling like a coyote, looking back over his shoulder.

He wanted to be able to sit out on the front gallery of Little Sam's adobe house and listen to the locusts in the burr-oaks and watch the thunderheads piling up in the north, threatening rain. He and Little Sam had always got a heap of pleasure and satisfaction out of watching a rainstorm come whooping down through the mesquites.

But how long could he hold himself? How long before that fierce bitterness inside him boiled over and he went wild with the thirst to kill and avenge the murder of his father? Dayton Fant knew it wouldn't be long.

At the forks of the road leading toward Sabinal, Dayton Fant encountered Daniel Berry, his neighbor to the north.

The little old scarecrow rancher saw him coming and pulled up to wait. Shrunken by years of hard work, cramped and drawn by vicious attacks of rheumatism, the little old man sat humped in his saddle, resembling nothing so much as a crippled grasshopper. His jeans were wash-faded and his vest ripped under one arm. But he rode a cat-stepping horse and his rigging was of the best. Fancy, too. He led a saddled horse.

"By God!" he exclaimed when he recognized the approaching puncher. "Ain't the law never run you down yet? I'll swear. The country ain't got no protection a'tall no more!"

Dayton Fant's heart lifted and his generous mouth broke into the first real smile in months. "They kept me on the jump," he admitted. "But I'm hard to corner."

Daniel Berry swept off a weather-beaten hat to slap his leg with it and cackle. His blue eyes twinkled as he reached out a hard hand to shake.

"Glad to see you, boy," he said. "When did you pull in and what are you here for?"

"Got back this morning," said Dayton Fant. "Run some Three Fish riders off the Circle A and then rode out, hoping I'd run into your daughter Isabel and miss her old man!"

"Well, now," hedged the puckery-eyed little rancher with mock gravity, "I don't generally hold with letting my daughter run with owlhooters. But seeing as how I'm all crippled up and too old to defend me'n mine, reckon I'll have to overlook same. Isabel's coming in on the stage from Santone this evening. Been off gadding around and blowing in a heap of hard-earned money. If you was to happen to be going into town anyhow, you could ride back with her. Save my old bones from snarling and gnawing at me all the way there and back."

"I've just recollected," said Dayton Fant, "some mighty important business I've got to see about in Sabinal. You can ride on back home and set with your jug."

"Son," said Daniel Berry, his obvious delight at the meeting suddenly switching to grave concern. "While you're there, you just as well hunt up Pecos Hagar and kill him!"

"Do what!" exclaimed the surprised cowboy.

"That's what I mean, boy," Daniel Berry said. "Shoot him down like a yaller dog. I can't swear he's the one that gunned down your pa, but him and other Three Fish riders made up Sheriff Moss' posse that day. And the day before, Little Sam borrowed fifteen hundred dollars in gold from me. He never banked it. I checked on that. The undertaker didn't find it on his body. But one of my riders claims he's seen Pecos sling around a hell of a lot of money to be drawing Three-Fish rider pay."

First blank amazement, then a swelling surge of wrath held Dayton Fant silent for a long time. Finally, a tremor passed through his big body and he said: "I'll see about paying you back that fifteen hundred as quick as I can!"

Daniel Berry's saddle-leather face darkened and he drew back as if insulted. "To hell with the money. I'm making money hand-over-fist these days. But you'll save trouble by shooting that devil down—and quick!

"That bunch got Little Sam, boy. They're out to get you, too. And the quicker you start thinning their ranks, the better off you are. Little Sam tried patience till they stole him blind and then murdered him. Patience won't stop 'em. They're after them mesquite-grass flats and river front you got and gun-talk is the only language they'll understand!"

Dayton Fant reached for the bridle reins on the spare horse. "I'll see about Hagar," he said grimly.

★

THE stage was pulling into Sabinal with yells, the cracking of whips and general confusion when Dayton Fant rode into town. Out of the dust cloud emerged the figure for which the cowboy was looking with hunger in his eyes.

Isabel Berry—small, dark of hair, and vivacious, her deep blue eyes glancing about. They fell upon Dayton Fant and widened with incredulity. Her face turned white for a moment, then her small hand reached out and clasped his warmly.

"It's Dayton!" she exclaimed. "Dayton Fant! It doesn't seem possible!" She glanced hastily around. "Is it all right, Dayton?"

Her obvious pleasure and concern

stirred him deeply. "It's all right, Isabel!" he said a bit cynically, "after keeping me on the dodge five years, they've decided I'm a law-abiding citizen!"

She looked up at him quickly, blue eyes probing. "Don't be bitter about it, Dayton," she pleaded.

He drew her up onto the sidewalk. His mouth twisted with a wry grin at the amount of luggage the driver was handing down for her.

"I reckon old Daniel don't know women no better than I do. He ought to have sent a wagon."

"Are we horseback?" questioned the girl.

He nodded and she exclaimed. "Oh, I'm glad. We can send this out by the liveryman. I'll change to riding garb at the hotel. And we'll ride home together. It'll be like old times again!"

Dayton Fant wondered where there was another girl like her. He escorted her to the hotel and then waited with the horses.

He was standing out on the sidewalk rolling a smoke when a man in cowpuncher clothes came up from the side and planted himself squarely in front of him. The man was a slightly-built young rider, with a long square jaw and menacing eyes that set too closely against a high-bridged nose. He wore two guns and kept his trim feet planted wide and solidly under him.

"Are you Fant?" he demanded bluntly.

Dayton Fant looked him up and down. "Yeah," he conceded. "I'm Fant. What about it?"

"I'm Pecos Hagar," he said and hooked his thumb in his gun belts. "Me'n you've got a crow to pick."

Fant continued to roll his cigarette. He noticed out of the corner of his eyes how fast those in the near vicinity were clearing out. He ran his tongue under the thin edge of the paper and reached for a match. Trouble was coming his way and he had to check it somehow.

"I'm agreeable," he said quietly. "Let's get to picking."

Hagar said: "Fant, you ain't wanted in these parts. You better drift. You better drift now."

Dayton Fant wanted to kill. The urge was wild in him, but he could almost hear Little Sam saying: "Keep a nose twist on your temper, son, and use your head more."

His face broke into a genial smile. "Hagar," he said confidingly, "you don't want to pick a scrap with me now. You want to know why?"

"Why? Whatta you mean, hombre?" Hagar said, taken aback at this apparent friendliness.

Fant glanced past Hagar to see Jess Barker coming down the sidewalk in a swift walk. He called out: "Just a minute, Jess. This is private!"

Hagar's head jerked around. For an instant, his narrow eyes shifted from the cowboy.

Dayton Fant moved quickly then. His hand flashed down, swung up. Hagar was going for his gun now, but he was too late. Fant caught the rider across the mouth with two swift, vicious blows of his gun-barrel. Hagar dropped senseless.

Jess Barker had halted the moment that Fant called. When Hagar dropped, the newly appointed sheriff swung around and quickly retraced his steps.

A slight grin tugged at one corner of Fant's mouth. He knew Jess Barker. The sheriff hadn't seen a thing!

Fant turned to see a white-faced Isabel Berry standing in the hotel doorway. She came and gripped his arm. "That man's dangerous, Dayton," she said in a low, excited voice. "Terribly dangerous. For a moment I was afraid—"

Dayton Fant led her toward the waiting horses. "Pa used to say that it don't never pay to be afraid, Isabel," he said. "And I've found pa was mostly right about things!"

They mounted and rode out of town.

★

SUPPER that night at the Berry ranch was a fine thing. Isabel and her mother were gracious and happy with talk and Daniel Berry full of sharp, dry wit, in spite of another attack of rheumatism.

While the women-folks were washing the supper dishes, Daniel Berry led the cowboy into the living room and presented him with a check to cover the back-tax payment owing to Ace White. Then he told the cowboy to go to hell when Dayton Fant objected, on the grounds that he already owed the rancher more than he could pay.

"You think," Berry grouched, "that I want you to go broke? You think I want my girl marrying a forty-a-month cowchowser?"

"But," stammered the red-faced Dayton Fant, "I ain't—I mean, we never—"

"Well, why in hell ain't you?" Berry flared.. "You mean you fizzled that job like you done about killing Pecos Hagar? Why didn't you stay at home in the first place. Damned if you ain't getting more like Little Sam every day?"

Isabel stepped into the room in time to save Dayton Fant further embarrassment. No chance presented itself to the cowboy for returning the check later. He carried it in his pocket when he rode home.

He went to bed with a thrilling sense of high elation. But it didn't keep him awake for long. He was too tired. . . .

Dayton Fant knew the voices and hammering on his door had been going on for some time when he finally awakened. He stumbled to the window and looked out, still in a half stupor. It was the dark hour before dawn, when the coyotes howl in the mesquites. He could see nothing.

A voice he didn't recognize called again and the knocking was renewed.

"Fant! You at home!"

"Just a minute!" called Fant. "Who is it?"

"Sheriff's posse. - Manhunt. Need you to help out!"

Dayton Fant reached for his clothes in the dark and struggled into them. He buckled on his gun belt, groped for the door, and shouldered it open.

"That you, Barker?" he asked.

The answer was a smother of clawing hands that gripped him from all sides, bearing him down instantly.

Caught by surprise, he had no chance to defend himself. And after the first sudden start and struggle, he didn't try. He went limp, held his breath and waited for a better chance. It came when the men gripping him encountered no more resistance and began piling off. Then, with a sudden wrench, Fant got elbow room and surged up. A vicious jab with his heavy fist caught a panting man in the mouth and sent him reeling backward with a startled howl of pain.

Fant stabbed a hand at his gun then, but it was already gone. He flung himself toward the only man who was still on his horse, trying to dislodge him, but felt a gun-muzzle jam into his hip. That, with the startled motion of the horse, threw him backward, and the next thing he knew

The gifted Texas author of this novel gives us another of his warmly human dramatic long stories next month. You'll want to meet crusty old Gawdamighty Reagan, two-bit rancher, and his salty trouble-hunting sons, Shinnery Red, and the Shirt-Tail Kid! Watch for them in the next issue—on sale October 2nd!

he'd hit the ground, and was half dazed.

There were too many of them. They crushed him down again, piling on till he wanted to scream with the agony of their crushing weight. But no sound came from his lips. He couldn't even breathe.

For a moment there his senses reeled and he went out. When he came to, they had him in a saddle, with his hands tied to the horn and his feet lashed to the stirrups. Masked figures, dark in the oncoming light, were mounting horses all around him.

Then his horse was moving and the figures were melting away into the darkness. He was left riding with one man who forced his horse along at a fast clip, leading Fant's mount beside him.

A little later, as if in afterthought, the man set his horse back on its haunches and drew Dayton Fant's mount up close. He jerked out a dark bandana and blindfolded his victim. Then they were riding again, riding fast, and Dayton Fant felt the miles slip behind.

The other maintained his silence, and Dayton Fant had been on the dodge long enough in the past to know that asking questions here would be a waste of breath. But he continued to wonder what it was all about. It couldn't be a lynching, else it would already have been done. What was it, then?

There was no answer to that, of course.

The sunlight hurt Dayton Fant's eyes when his horse was finally brought to a stop and the blindfold jerked off. The masked rider cut loose the cowboy's bonds and ordered him to dismount. Shielding his eyes from the glare of the rising sun with his hands, the puncher stepped down. The other led him inside a narrow-mouthed cave that smelled strongly of bats.

The light wasn't so bright here. Dayton Fant could see better. He recognized the cave instantly. It was the same one he and Jess Barker used to camp in when they rode back up the canyon here with their hounds to cat-hunt.

"Now, pardner, rest and take it easy," his captor ordered. "You can hear the horses leaving and there's a gent setting yonder in the mouth of the cave with a saddle gun across his lap. So don't be in no rush to quit our company."

Dayton Fant rubbed his chafed wrists and examined the man who had brought him in. He saw before him a blocky, heavy-set man with broad shoulders and a thick neck. His clothes, while not dressy, were better than those the average rider wore. The features of his face were hidden by his red-checked mask, but the cowboy was certain he was not acquainted with the man.

"What's the play here?" he wanted to know. "What was I brought up here for?"

"They call it a rest cure, brother," chuckled the masked man. "You just set and rest your tail and that's all there is to it. And if you'll just get at it now, I'll go scorch us up a batch of breakfast."

Thirty minutes later the masked man returned with a tin plate of bacon and eggs floating around in grease and sourdough biscuits. He'd made good his word. The food was scorched.

Still puzzled, but hungry, Dayton Fant squatted on his spurs and ate. His captor went back outside for a pot of black coffee. The coffee was good. The cowboy rolled a smoke to go with it and felt better.

"Was Pecos Hagar in on this job?" he probed.

"Who's Pecos Hagar?" the other asked. "Never heard of him!"

Dayton Fant sipped more coffee. He reckoned the man was lying. "Pecos Hagar's the gent who stole fifteen hundred dollars in gold off the dead body of my old man," he declared.

To his surprise, the other's eyes glittered at him through the slitted mask.

"Now that's strange," he said. "I reckon that's where that gold come from."

"What gold?" Dayton Fant wanted to know.

"Why," said his captor, "last night a gent hands me a morral with a batch of gold in it and tells me to give it to you. Claims he's paying off an old debt. I'll go get it. It's hanging on my saddle right now."

He was gone and then back in a few minutes. He tossed a weighted morral down in front of the puncher. It clinked musically against the rock floor.

"Here you are, brother," he said, turning and stepping back out of the cave.

The masked guard at the cave entrance got up and followed. They stepped out of sight around a jutting corner of rocks.

Feeling like a man in a dream, Dayton Fant picked up the morral and untied a rawhide string that closed the top. He reached inside and then sat back stupefied, clutching a handful of gold coins.

That stumped the cowboy. There was exactly fifteen hundred dollars in gold in that morral. His captor had tossed it to him like so much salt. Claimed a stranger had asked him to turn it over to Dayton Fant the night before.

Dayton had been shooting in the dark when he'd asked about Pecos Hagar. Now he wondered. Could Hagar have repented of killing his father and made some sort of effort in retribution? That didn't tally with Dayton Fant's judgment of the rider who had attempted to gun him down on the streets of Sabinal the day before. But then, what was the explanation?

Dayton Fant squatted there and mulled the thing over for hours. Nothing about it made sense. He eased to the mouth of the cave, aiming to call in his captor and try to gain more enlightenment.

There was no one there. He called. No one answered. Cautiously, he stuck his head out, half afraid he was inviting a bullet.

Apparently nobody was around. Down the rock-littered slope apiece stood a saddled horse. Dayton Fant could read the Circle A brand on the animal's left hip from where he stood. The horse stood with reins hooked over a broken snag on a dead mesquite. The butt of a saddle-gun stuck up out of a scabbard and the cowboy's gun-belt and sixgun hung from the horn.

Dayton Fant suddenly felt his scalp crawl under his hat. Hell, this was a death trap of some kind. He saw that now in a flash of understanding. He didn't know just how it was to be sprung, but here he stood in the mouth of the cave, clutching the bait!

With sudden, savage resolution, he tossed the morral of gold back into the cave. Maybe there was still time. He hated to make a try for that horse, but he knew he had to have a mount and those guns.

Low scrub oak and bee-myrtle hid part of the cave opening. Lower down, the brush thinned out toward the narrow dry wash in the bottom of the canyon. Dayton thought he might make it through the brush. He dropped to his hands and knees and crawled cautiously but quickly down the slope.

He was getting close when the horse shied at him and fell back against the reins. Fant's heart jumped into his throat. Now he'd have to expose himself. That, or frighten the horse till he fought loose.

He rose, speaking softly to the animal and approached. He eased the gun-belt off the saddle horn and buckled it around his slim waist. Then he whirled suddenly at a sound to one side, clawing for his gun.

Pecos Hagar had stepped out of the brush, not twenty steps away.

It was an even break. Evidently, Hagar hadn't seen the cowboy until this moment. With one startled ejaculation, the gunman's right hand swooped down for his cutter.

Through Dayton slashed a deadly, murderous hatred. Then both guns crashed, almost as one, and the heavy reports of the shots slapped back and forth.

Hagar dropped into the brush from which he'd emerged and lay there, thrashing and wallowing. Dayton Fant stood fingering a bullet hole in the leg of his trousers.

"I guess," said a voice behind him, "you'd better get 'em up, Dayton Fant!"

A tremor went up the cowboy's spine. He dropped his gun and lifted his hands.

The new sheriff, Jess Barker, stood with a Winchester in his hands.

Dayton heaved a sigh of relief. "I'm sure glad it's you, Jess," he said.

The quick upsweep of the Winchester and the grave, almost fearful look that flashed into Barker's eyes halted him.

"My God, Jess!" Fant exclaimed. "You don't look for me to shoot you!"

The gun barrel didn't waver. "I don't know, Dayton," Barker said, frowning. "You ain't a damn bit backward about shooting nobody, it looks like!"

Quick apprehension cut through Dayton. "Couldn't afford to, with Hagar. What's it all about now, Jess?"

"I reckon you're under arrest, Dayton."

Things were coming too fast for Dayton Fant. Unreasonable anger flashed through him. "For shooting that murdering dog!" he flared. "Hell, it was him or me! Quit acting like a fool, Jess!"

The young sheriff studied his boyhood friend closely for a long minute. "Dayton," he said. "Walk away from that gun. Then we'll set and talk it over."

CHAPTER THREE

Cow-Whips and Hot Lead

DAYTON'S anger died as quickly as it had come. He stepped away and sat down on a flat rock in the shade of a scrub cedar.

"All right, Jess," he said. "Speak up!"

Barker rolled a careful smoke and lighted it before he answered. Then he said. "I reckon I'll ask the questions, Dayton. Where was you last night?"

Fant said: "I et supper with Daniel Berry and his folks. Rode home and slept till close to daylight. Then rode up here at the suggestion of some gents who wore masks. . . ."

Jess Barker's face, as he listened, was a study in emotions. The keen, probing eyes searched Fant at first with frank disbelief, then with growing dismay.

"You got the gold to back it all up?" he wanted to know.

"It's yonder in that cave, Jess. I was beginning to smell the skunk in the woodpile when I throwed it down. Didn't want to be caught with it!"

They climbed back up the steep slope and Fant brought out the morral of gold. Barker lifted out a handful of the coins and let them leak slowly back through his fingers.

"Dayton," he said finally, "you don't expect me to swaller a yarn like this. Getting held up and having money give you?"

"Yeah, Jess. You'll believe it. Because you know I'm telling the truth."

"But you don't expect nobody else to, say a court jury, for instance?"

He got to his feet and handed Fant his gun. "About daylight this morning, Dayton," he said, "a couple of gents stirred me out of bed with news that Ace White's bank had been robbed. I go down and look the thing over. The robber don't get into the vault, but cleans out everything else. And he leaves a heap of tools and such with Circle A marks on 'em, a hammer and a couple of cold chisels.

"That looks like too damn many clues to me. But Ace White and his bunch want to know how soon I can pick you up. They come along to help me do it. We find your bed all made up, like you ain't

slept there, and I reckon I started doubting you a little then. But not enough to bring all that bunch up here, looking for you in the only place I knowed you might be holed up.

"I couldn't shake Hagar. Seemed like he knowed the way up here as well as me. But when you gunned him down so sudden, I reckon I was doubting you more. I'm apologizing. I can see you're in a tight, and now I'm in it with you."

"You check on the whereabouts of the Three Fish bunch before you left?"

"Yeah. Main bunch taken in a dance at the Lucky Lady last night. What sort of a gent was it that brought you in?"

"Blocky, square-shouldered cuss," said Dayton Fant. "Talked easy and mighty little. Face covered with a bandana. Only little thing I noticed about him was the way he held a cigarette when he smoked. Kept it cupped inside his hand, like maybe he expected the fire to get blowed out! And he wore a split-topped boot on a crooked right leg."

"That was a Three Fish rider called Nacagdoches." Jess Barker frowned. "That's a starter, I reckon. But it still ain't evidence. We got to get evidence. And here's this dead Hagar. . . ."

The noon-day heat was becoming oppressive there in the canyon and to the north monstrous thunderheads, black-bodied and fringed in white, were piling up with threatening rumbles.

Dayton Fant stood and stared moodily at the gathering storm, his black eyes somber. This was the kind of storm Little Sam liked to sit and watch. "A chunk-floater," Little Sam would have called it. The kind that rips the sky apart with clashing thunder. . . . But for the treacherous greed of Ace White and his Three Fish gundogs, Little Sam would be sitting on his front gallery now, watching.

"Jess," Dayton Fant asked grimly. "Did you ever just set and watch a thunder storm build up and cut loose?"

The young sheriff glanced curiously at his friend. "Yeah," he said. "It makes a mighty good show, but—"

"Me'n pa," broke in Dayton Fant, "used to watch them a heap. I aim to do it again. And I don't aim to have nothing else on my mind when I do it. I'm tired of this coyoting around, dodging the law. I'm going after Ace White and his bunch. I'm going after the evidence we need, and I aim to get it. If I have to cut somebody with a cow-whip!"

"Yeah," said Barker. "What's on your mind?"

Grim determination was in every line of Dayton Fant's face. "You know a little dried-up gent with a squirrel mouth that rides for Ace White—Papalote Saddler? I've got a notion that if that rat's hide was burnt he'd give up head."

"He might," agreed Barker.

"If I had him to myself for a couple of hours. . . ." Dayton Fant mused.

"I reckon I could locate him," said Barker. "Might send him out to old Daniel Berry's spread with a note."

"That'll do," said Fant. "I'll be there to welcome him. And along about dark, could you ride in with Ace White and a couple of gents that ain't in his pay? Maybe you've been tipped off I'll ride in there tonight."

Jess Barker frowned. "That'll likely be harder to arrange," he said. "But I'll give it a hell of a try. . . . How do you aim to dodge Ace's manhunters?"

"It'll be raining in less than a hour. That'll give me cover. You ride on now. I'll keep Hagar's body for company. Sight of that hole between his eyes might help Papalote Saddler to talk."

OLD DANIEL BERRY sloshed out into the howling wind and rain to help Dayton Fant drag the body of Pecos Hagar into an empty log corn crib. They dumped the corpse in a pile of shucks and the little old man

straightened with eyes alight and eager.

"Son," he said cheerfully above the roll of thunder, "your tail's in a crack!"

"And it's pinching," admitted Dayton Fant. "But when that Papalote Saddler shows up here, I aim to borrow your cow whip and make somebody else jump and holler for a spell. Reckon this storm'll keep Isabel and Mrs. Berry in town for the night?"

"If they come in, I'll send 'em over to straighten up your house," Berry said. "Allow it's dirty, anyhow. In the meantime, get your saddle on a fresh hoss. You got some tall riding to do yet."

Dayton Fant looked surprised. "Where to?"

"Why, to round up this Nacagdoches feller, you idjit!" exclaimed Berry. "Hell, you don't think Saddler's confession made under threat of a cow-whip is going to stand up in court, do you?"

Dayton Fant stood staring at the little old rancher, too baffled to speak.

"Look at it this way, boy," continued Daniel Berry. "How does Ace White figure you? Figures you'll hold off, let yourself be hunted. Maybe shoot up a few gents. Then get killed off or caught.

"Say you get caught. Your defense is to try to show you didn't pull this bank-robbing job. You spring this wild yarn about Ace White and his bunch holding up their bank to hand you fifteen hundred dollars. They'll laugh your neck right into the loop. You don't catch Ace White with his pants down that easy.

"You've got to go kick the lid off, boy. Go bust that town wide open. Scare 'em till they chatter like mocking birds with snakes in their nest. Drag that-there Nacogdoches gent back here by the ears and throw him and his confession into Ace White's face, before witnesses. Crack Ace before he gets a chance to think his way out. I'll work on this Saddler."

"By God!" Fant exclaimed. "It's risky, but that might do it!"

"Risky!" yelped old Daniel. "Hell, it's risky to be alive. But a man's got to take his chances!"

"I reckon you're right," said Dayton Fant with new resolution. "I recollect how pa always used to say that the only man fit to live was the one who wasn't afraid to die. I don't figure I'm afraid to make a stab at cracking that town. Reckon I just been expecting to have my peace and quiet handed out to me, without having to fight for it!"

"There you are!" exclaimed Daniel Berry. Then his fierce old eyes softened and a gnarled hand reached out to slap the cowboy's shoulder. "But if you don't make it back, all in one piece, Isabel and her ma'll sure give me hell!"

"I'll come back," said Dayton Fant with conviction. "But if Jess Barker manages to bring Ace White here like he's promised, how do you aim to hold him till I get back?"

"I'll hold him," declared Berry. "Don't you worry about that. I don't reckon Ace White would jump right square into hell for a bottle of whiskey, but you can bet he'll mess around the entrance hole a spell before he gives up the idea."

THE rain was slacking off when Dayton Fant rode into Sabinal about sundown. He was drenched to the skin. His gun and gun-hand were slick with water. But sight of a lone Three Fish horse drooping at the hitch-rack before the Lucky Lady Saloon lifted his spirits.

Other than this horse and a couple tied in front of the hotel, the street seemed deserted. Dayton dismounted before the Lucky Lady. Then he shoved through the doors.

A bald-headed barkeep leaned a comfortable belly against the bar and conversed with a single customer. Otherwise, the place was deserted.

The single customer was his man, Nac-

agdoches. Dayton recognized him instantly. He could tell by that split-topped boot on a slightly crooked leg, by the way the man kept his cigarette cupped in his hand.

Dayton was a couple of steps inside the room when the barkeep looked up. Instantly, the barkeep shot out of sight behind the bar. The Three Fish rider turned.

"Howdy, Nacagdoches!" Dayton greeted casually, then called sharply to the bartender. "All right, Deacon. I haven't shot you yet. Get up and give me a drink. How about a refill, Nacagdoches?"

The blocky rider lifted one quizzical eyebrow. "Why not?" he said.

The drinks were served. The barkeep shuffled hurriedly away. Dayton Fant turned to his drinking partner. "Nacagdoches," he said quietly, "would a man have to fight you to get you to swear on a witness stand about holding me in that cave and planting that gold on me?"

Whatever the Three Fish rider had been expecting, it wasn't this. Half-way to his mouth with his drink, he halted it, his jaws sagging open and his eyes widening again. Slowly, he replaced his drink on the bar. A hint of admiration leaped into his milky eyes.

"Well, I'll be a mule!" he exclaimed, then added: "Fant, you're either the nerviest gent I ever bared an eyeball to, or the damnedest fool. I don't know which!"

Dayton Fant grinned. "Likely the damnedest fool!" he said. "But nobody can blame a man for trying. Well?"

A sudden humorous quirk twisted the Three Fish rider's lips. "It'd be a hell of a joke on Ace!" he said, apparently toying with the idea. "I didn't like the set-up from the beginning. Too damn raw. Told Ace it was. But he asks me will I take care of you and stay out of-the way."

"Then you'll talk?" said Dayton Fant.

The rider shook his head regretfully. "Nope, Fant. I sure hate to fight as game a gent as you, but I draw Three Fish wages. I couldn't—"

The batwing doors burst suddenly open. In stepped two of the three Three Fish riders Dayton Fant had driven from the front gallery of his home the day before—the big tall loose-lipped one and the short, red-faced man with indifferent eyes.

One glance at Dayton, and the newcomers went for their guns, without saying a word. At the same instant, the barkeep, who had rounded up enough nerve to pull a sneak down the bar, swung at Fant's head with a full quart bottle.

The loaded bottle caught him at the burr of his ear and knocked him off his feet. He went down, clawing instinctively for his gun.

Guns of the newcomers bucked and roared, and lead meant for Dayton Fant caught Nacagdoches in the belly, doubling him up. At the same instant, Dayton Fant hit the floor, rolled to one elbow, and loosed two desperately quick shots at the blurred figures.

He was back on his feet when the momentary blindness cleared. The pardners of Papalote Saddler lay sprawled in the doorway. Nacagdoches sat with his back braced against the bar. He was clutching at his stomach. At the door, the barkeep was trying frantically to push his way out, while somebody outside was trying just as determinedly to push in.

The barkeep lost in the game of push and stumbled backward before the onrush of three excited men. One, Dayton Fant recognized as Crip Hepply, the liveryman. The other two, he didn't know.

The cowboy swung up his gun.

"Hold it!" he barked, then commanded in a voice of authority: "One of you gents go back and keep everybody outside. The rest of you look into this here killing before you go any further. Corner that barkeep there. He knows what's taken place here. Make him talk. Come on—I've done all the shooting I want to do!"

They moved at that. One hurriedly shoved back outside, checking the advance

of the gathering crowd. The other two came forward to help Nacagdoches to a more comfortable position. Dayton Fant watched them grimly.

Nacagdoches was cashing in his chips and he knew it. They stretched him out on the floor and poured liquor between his clenched teeth. He opened his eyes and looked up.

"I'm clearing Fant before I go," he gasped. "Game gent. Square. I done him dirt. Held him out in that cave and planted gold on him. Ace White robbed his own bank. Ace had it fixed to—"

He grimaced, stiffened with spasms, then slowly relaxed. His eyes clouded and his head rolled to one side.

"Well, gents, you heard it!" said Dayton Fant. "Now step out and pass the word along to the bunch outside. I've still got to move fast and I don't want to be held up by no lynching party when I leave."

He whirled suddenly on the pasty-faced bartender. "All right, Deacon," he snapped. "What about that dance last night? When did the Three Fish bunch of riders leave and how long was they gone? Speak up, and don't lie! I can tell when you're lying. Your ears turn red!"

The horror-stricken barkeep took one glance at the fierce light in the puncher's black eyes, then stared tremblingly into the muzzle of the gun covering him.

"Sure! I'll tell!" he chattered. "They left a little before midnight and didn't show up here until just about daylight. Some of them was beat up and their horses was rode down!"

"Much obliged, Deacon," said Dayton Fant. "Now get a move on. You're coming with me and tell your little story in front of Ace White!"

He turned at the touch of Crip Hepply's hand on his arm.

"I reckon, Fant," said the little old peg-legged liveryman, "that there's some others around here who'd like to see Ace White's face when Deacon spills the beans. Give us a minute or two, and we'll ride with you!"

★

THEY rode out into the gathering darkness. The storm had passed on, rumbling and flashing far to the south, leaving the sky clear and the air fresh and clean. The ground was slushy underfoot, but the party rode fast, splashing mud high. Dayton Fant rode in the lead, with the frightened Deacon clinging desperately to the saddle horn on a horse that Crip Hepply led.

Some of the group were exultant and talkative, but Dayton Fant rode in grim silence. He was dog tired. He had been on the move almost constantly for days now, living on his nerves. But until this whole thing was settled and wiped off his mind, there'd be no let-down for him.

He slowed the rush of riders a half a mile from Daniel Berry's spread, cautioning them to close in quietly until they got the lay of the land. He and Crip Hepply swung off toward the corn crib where he'd left the body of Pecos Hagar.

"There ought to be another fish here, softened up and ready to talk by now," he explained.

There was. He lifted the heavy bar and flung back the door. Inside, crouched in a corner as far away from Hagar's corpse as he could get, was Papalote Saddler, shivering in abject terror.

He came out at Fant's command, a whimpering wretched thing, too frightened for the moment to say a word. Beside the bartender, Deacon, he walked toward the lighted house, casting occasional furtive glances over his skinny shoulders at the two men herding him along.

Through the open window, Dayton could see old Daniel making the rounds with a whiskey jug. Filling up glasses for

Ace White and the sheriff, Jess Barker, and a couple of other men.

Dayton Fant didn't bother to knock. He flung open the door and shoved his two captives in ahead of him. The rest of the riders who had followed him out had taken up positions around the house, to make sure that White didn't make a break and escape.

Daniel Berry was spieling off one of his long-winded yarns, keeping the bunch entertained, holding them without their knowledge.

When the door opened, Ace White looked up. His face blanched at the sight of Fant and the captives. He half rose from the chair, spilling liquor down the front of his trousers.

Fant handed him a grim, savage smile. "Howdy, Ace," he greeted. "Here's a couple of your boys who don't like the way you run things. They want to make some complaints to the sheriff. Go on, Deacon," he prodded.

At the sight of the men before him, at meeting the black, murderous frown of Ace White, the bartender turned pale. He licked his lips and started his story.

"It wasn't Fant that started it," he declared. "I jumped him with a whiskey bottle and Severson and Smokey gunned down Nacagdoches by mistake. Fant, here—"

Suddenly the skinny Papalote Saddler jerked forward, interrupting in a shrill, frantic voice.

"I knowed it wouldn't work. You hadn't oughta hired Pecos to kill Little Sam Fant, Ace. Now they've got Hagar's corpse out yonder in a corn crib. They've made me set there for hours, looking at the bullet hole in his head. And they swear they're gonna use a cow-whip on me later!"

It hit Ace White like a thunderbolt. He knew now that they had him, that he didn't have time to think, to lie, to make plans and scheme out of this one. The red flared suddenly in his face and he whirled on Dayton Fant, reaching for his gun in the same movement.

"You damned jailbird!" roared the banker.

Dayton Fant's lips were set in a savage, ugly grin as he fired.

The boss of the Three Fish outfit whirled again, this time crying out in anguish. His gun clattered to the floor and he gripped his right arm with his left hand. Blood spurted out between his fingers and a pallor crept into his heavy features.

With a casual movement, Jess Barker reached into his coat pocket and drew out a pair of handcuffs. He snapped them on the rancher's wrists. "Well," he observed, "I reckon that's all."

"Nope," contradicted old Daniel Berry. "That's not quite all. Some of these boys haven't had a drink yet." He cackled delightedly at the bunch, evidently half drunk on his own liquor.

* * *

A second rainstorm was approaching before Isabel Berry and her mother drove up in a buggy. They'd been cleaning up Dayton's rooms at the Circle A at Berry's suggestion. Dayton Fant and old Daniel Berry sat on the front gallery of Berry's spread where they had waited for them to come home.

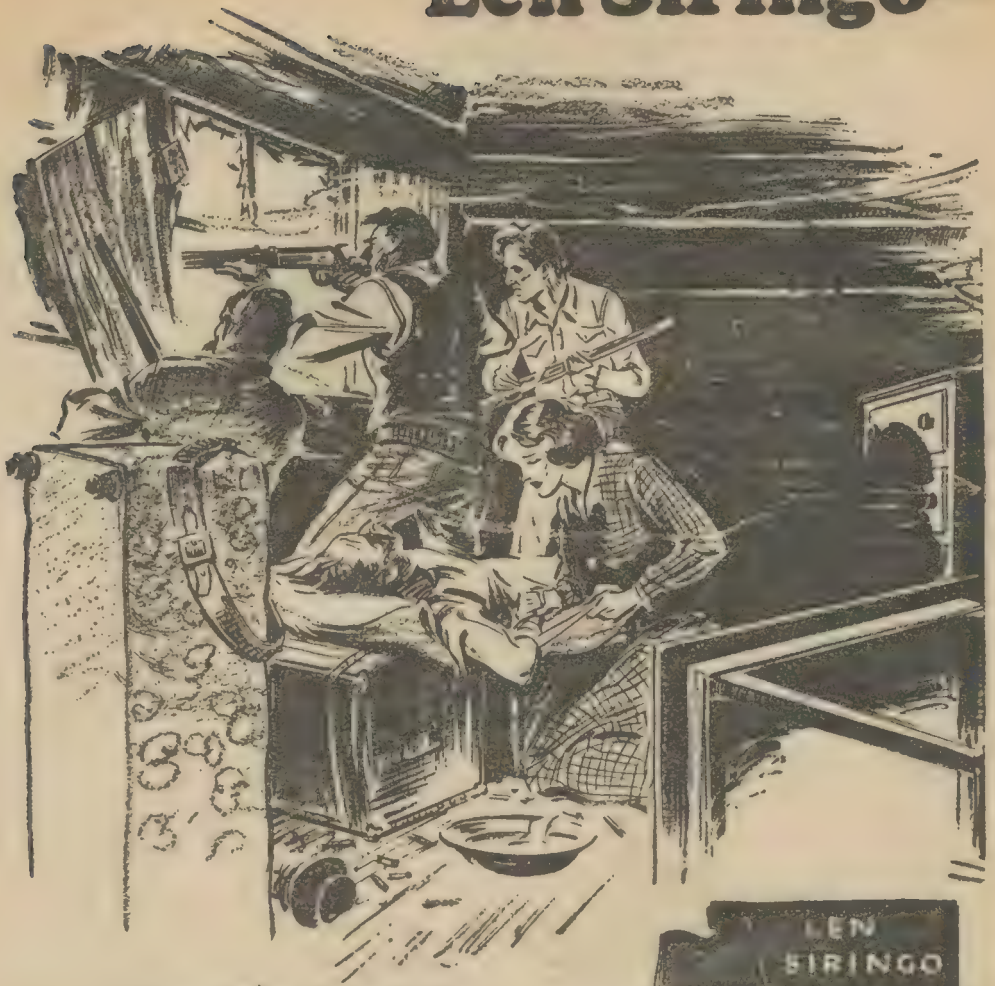
The little old rancher had to go back into the house for the second jug before they got back. He stood in the doorway, pounding the bottom of the jug with his fist to loosen the stopper while he observed the weather with a critical eye.

"Off hand," he said, "I'd say it's fixing to come another shower."

"Shower, hell!" exclaimed Dayton Fant. "Pa would have called that one a gulley-humper!"

THE END

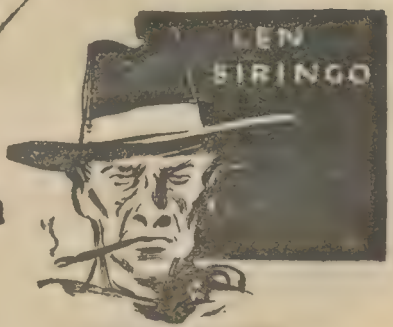
Len Siringo—



Smashing Novel of Freedom's Gunman, by

W. Ryerson Johnson

Not one honest rancher, merchant or miner in all the rich Storm Valley country dared to draw a single breath without express permission of the Thunderbolt Kid and his ruthless crew of greedy-handed killers. . . . And not even the far-famed Len Siringo, freedom's gunman, it was said, could hope to survive against the deadly gun-lightning of the Kid's renegade army.



CHAPTER ONE

Pardners for the Powdersmoke Prance

THE three who ducked into the blacksmith shop to get out of the rain were cut to the same sinister pattern: hard eyes, tight lips, a caged-animal restlessness in the way they moved.

The rain stopped almost as soon as it began, and the sun poked out to burn

Lightning Merchant

The embattled ranchers threw back lead for lead. . . .

through the clouds. The storm was over. In the sky, that was. But in Hammer Harmon's blacksmith shop the crash of thunder still remained. Gun-thunder!

It was Willie Shrike who started it. Teetering on his high heels, the trigger-jittered gunnie looked from his two pards to the blacksmith, and said, "He was a fandango fool at the dance the other night. He thinks his girl's too good for us. He wasn't leavin' any of us cut in."

Split-finger Joe Boyle scratched at his stubbled jaw, and chipped in: "Yeah, he *likes* to dance."

The other hardcase, Rance Dalzell, played along. With his chunky jowls working brutally on a cud of rough-cut, he mouthed a single word, "Dance!"

Hammer Harmon's eyes under the shock of sweat-wet hair that ruffed his forehead, blazed in quick anger. "Now look here—" he started.

Rance Dalzell triggered a shot against the anvil. The lead splayed off in the close general direction of Hammer Harmon.

"Dance!"

Split-Finger Joe Boyle clawed at his own iron. "Dance," he jabbed, while his

gun broke more of the thunder echoes.

Willie Shrike, whose gun-hand had perpetual fidgets, was laughing. It was a mirthless laugh that moved his lips but left his eyes still cruelly cold. "Dance," he said, and put his own lead to richocheting against the anvil.

Hammer Harmon was thinking desperately, "They're going to chew me up whether I dance or not. The hell with 'em; I won't dance!"

Aloud, he said, "Put your guns down and I'll take you on, all three at once, bare fists. I'll make you think you're red-hot horseshoes; I'll—"

Like measured sledge-blows, their lead kept slamming against the anvil, and Hammer Harmon felt a bullet, like a hot knife, crease his thigh. His strong body trembled from rage and uncertainty.

If he rushed them, they'd put their lead straight into him. And yet, richochet lead, this close, could kill! And Hammer Harmon had a lot to live for. He had Nancy Enderlee.

Outside the blacksmith shop a high-boarded freighter creaked along the mud-puddled street behind its four-horse team. It was the only thing moving. All up and down the short street men had come to the front of their stores. With the sweat of anguish on them, they stood rigid, hearing the shots. Tragically, they were paralyzed not so much by fear as by utter hopelessness.

Each spring Nature put on a violent sky show here. Thunder rolled, lightning daggered, and rain drummed into the grassy benches of Storm Valley. But the heft of the violence this year had been man-made—that is, if the individual who styled himself the Thunderbolt Kid, could be called a man.

A man didn't kill with gulcher's lead. A man didn't terrorize women, nor plunder with a pack of range pirates, filching hard-won gold from the pockets of settlers, taking the very ground from under their feet.

While the townsmen stood rooted in their grim despair, the freighter wheeled on through the muddy street, and stopped. Dully, the townsmen watched the driver back the huge wagon to the wide sliding door of the blacksmith shop. They saw him set the hand brakes and stand up. He was tall and spare; they could all see that. He was garbed in a funereal black, and he wore a black sombrero almost big enough to have served for an umbrella.

They saw him put a booted foot to the wheel and swing to the ground and go champing through the mud to the blacksmith door, looking oddly like a gangling buzzard. They could hear his voice boom above the gun roar.

"Well, well, boys! Havin' a little dancin' lesson, huh?"

The gun fire stopped. The townsmen swapped wondering glances. One by one they started apprehensively toward the blacksmith shop.

Here was death in the making, but the black-garbed stranger, unmindful of richocheting lead, had ambled in ahead of them and lit himself a stogy and started puffing with evident enjoyment. It was his casual acceptance of the set-up that put the stop to the triggering. But it was something more that kept it from starting again.

★

THE gun bullies, heeling around, looked into eyes of burning blackness. But except for the eyes the stranger appeared more ridiculous than dangerous, with his long sad face, his hawk's beak of a nose, and the dinky string tie in his celluloid collar. So it wasn't exactly from a sense of threat that the hardcases held their fire. Personality had something to do with it. That, and a fast line of gab that didn't give them time to think.

Waving his stogy toward the staring blacksmith, he remarked, "He's some

balky, huh? Like the hoss you can lead to the trough but you can't make him drink. Now you got this blacksmith fella hung on the end of your smoke-poles, but you can't get no animation in his feet, huh? Well, I got the answer to that, boys. Yes, sir, you jus' keep watchin' your Uncle Ben."

While he talked his elbows were flapping around like buzzards' wings, as he busied himself yanking the tail boards from the end of his wagon. He flipped back a tarp to disclose a curious contraption in a large glass case.

"What is it, hawk-nose?" Willie Shrike asked, scowling and moving closer.

The stranger fixed him with an amazed stare. "Is it possible my good man, that you don't know?"

"I asked you, didn't I?" the gunman slashed.

"So you did. Well, well, and I shall tell you. What does it look like, what could it be—except a dancin' machine."

"A *what?*"

"Positive guaranteed to teach the most recalcitrant student in one easy lesson."

"Huh? Teach what?"

"Dancin'!"

"You're locoed!"

Split-Finger Joe Boyle jabbed, "Maybe we better hand hawknose some of the same like the blacksmith's been gettin'."

While he answered questions the stranger had been sloshing around in his rubber boots, making adjustments to the massive contraption of brass balls, glass plates, insulated connecting rods and wires.

As though sensing that the talk was getting out of hand, he said, "Watch."

He started turning a crank. Some of the glass plates in the case revolved on a shaft. Faster and faster. A sharp crackling sound hit their ears, and then in the shadowed depths of the machine a violet spark leaped between two metal balls. The stranger cranked faster and adjusted the balls farther apart. The spark leaped the widening gap, crackling and forking like miniature lightning.

"There she is, gents," the stranger barked, "the dancin' teacher."

"Huh!" Rance Dalzell scoffed, "that all they is to it?" The beefy gunner had holstered his six-shooter, and shoved close.

"Here, hold these," the stranger said. He pressed a handle into each of Dalzell's hands. The handles were connected to the machine with wires. Dalzell dropped them as though they were hot potatoes, and let out a single bleat of surprise.

His pards gave him the horse laugh. He turned his anger from the stranger to them. "It's a 'lectric shockin' machine," he blasted them. "Try it yourselves if you think it's so funny."

The stranger shook his head. "Maybe you hadn't better," he told the two. "If the big fella can't take it, you sure couldn't."

"I can take anything he can!" Split-Finger made his brag. He holstered his gun, reached for the handles. He gritted his teeth, and the sweat beaded out on his face, but he held them.

"You was braced for it," Dalzell growled. "I can do it now."

All of Willie Shrike's brains weren't in his trigger finger. He hadn't been saying anything but his little ferret eyes, holding on the stranger had been darkening with suspicion.

"Who are you hawk-nose," he demanded sourly. "What's your grift?"

"Me?" the stranger answered innocently. "I'm Ben Ringo—Lightnin' Ben, they most commonly call me. What I do is go around and take the bolts out of thunderbolts."

"That," Willie Shrike said sarcastically, "is somethin' the Thnuderbolt Kid will be interested to hear about. All right, pilgrim, feed it down. So you go around makin' toy lightnin' with your electric

machine. What's it get you? How do you cash in?"

"Cash in?" Lightning Ben lowered his voice to a confidential tone. "Jus' gather in close here men, and I'll show you. But first I want to find out if there's any sportin' blood in the crowd." His hand dipped into his side coat pocket and came out jingling coins. "I have here three double-eagles," he intoned, "sixty dollars, gold. Sixty dollars says you can't hold on to the handles for ten seconds—"

Willie Shrike cursed, and put his gun to Lightning Ben's ribs. "Listen, conman," he slashed, "I only asked you to tell us, not clip us."

"Clip you?" Lightning Ben looked injured. "But how is that possible? I'm not asking you to put up any money, friend. I take all the risks. Look, I put the coins down on the edge of the wagon bed, one . . . two . . . three; one for each of you, see? Then I put my watch down here where you can all see it."

He turned and shoved one of the handles into the doubtful grasp of Rance Dalzell, and the other into Split-Finger Joe Boyle's hand. "Now, you don't feel anything, do you? You won't until your pardner here stands in the middle and takes you both by the hand. That'll what they call complete the circuit. The electricity will go round and round. And all you have to do is keep your eye on the watch. Ten seconds, and then you each reach for a gold piece. You ever make twenty dollars easier?"

Rance Dalzell looked at Willie Shrike and grinned crookedly. "Come on, Willy; what you got to lose?"

"He takes the bolts out of thunderbolts," Willie muttered, half to himself. "I don't like this hawk-nosed bunko man. He sounds off too fancy to suit me. I'm thinkin' I ought to swap him some quick lead for his gold—"

"Come on, Willie; what you scared of?" Split-Finger urged.

Willie Shrike gave in, stepped close and reached out his hands.

"That's right, Willie," Lightnin' Ben encouraged, "step right down here in the mud with your yards. For twenty dollars a fella don't mind wet boots, huh? Now keep your eyes on the watch while I start crankin'. The electricity'll tingle more and more as I crank faster and widen the spark gap. But shucks, it's only for ten seconds, then you grab the gold. Here we go!"

★

LIGHTNING BEN bent to the crank. The glass plates in the dry air of the case revolved against their friction blocks. A continuous snapping noise set up as the violet lightning started rippling between the conductors. The gun bullies had self-conscious grins on their faces at first. But that was only at first.

As they felt the current bite in, their faces set in tense lines, and their bodies grew rigid. The current fed on them stronger and stronger. It was more than they could take and stand still. Long before the ten seconds were up, they were leaping and jumping.

Lightning Ben, his long sad face lit with a somber smile, looked at the gaping blacksmith. "Didn't I tell you my machine would teach a man to dance in one easy lesson?"

Citizens were crowding in now, staring at the Thunderbolt Kid's three prize gunnies dancing in the mud as though the Devil himself were prodding them with his pitchfork.

Ten seconds passed, and nobody reached for the gold. With faces contorted, eyes bulging in panic, legs and arms jerking convulsively, the three hardcases held their death-like grip on each other and the handles of the "dancing machine."

"It's the electricity," the awed watch-

ers were telling each other. "They can't let go!"

Lightning Ben Ringo shrugged his loose-jointed shoulders and pocketed the gold-pieces. "Looks like they don't want the gold. Looks like they jus' want to play ring-around-a-rosy." He appeared to be solemnly considering. "Maybe they'd like to play drop-the-handkerchief for a change. Likely they ain't got handkerchiefs, so maybe they could play drop-the-sixguns instead."

Lightning Ben left his crank, and sloshed around in his rubber boots, lifting the guns from holsters. He gave them a heave to the back of the shop.

The crank slowed down, the violet sparks quit jumping, the current let go its strangle grip. The three hardcases pulled away with such uncalculated violence that they plopped down in the mud, where they sat, their breaths rasping.

"Soon as they've had time to rest up," Lightning Ben said to the blacksmith, "you might try *your* medicine on 'em."

Hammer Harmon stopped gasping. He turned eager eyes at the "dancing master." "You mean—"

"Ain't you been, now, entertainin' some bare-fist intentions?"

Hammer Harmon looked like he was about to purr with happiness. He swung his huge fists. "Let 'em come," he said.

They came. But not at Hammer Harmon. Rance Dalzell was the first to shake the numbing tingle from his muscles. He lunged up and came at Lightning Ben Ringo in a bull rush. Lightning Ben planted himself and let Dalzell run into his fist. Dalzell sat back in the mud again with a grunt.

Split-Finger Joe Boyle and Willlie Shrike rared up and came in right after him. But they made the "dancing master" do a little footwork. He had to make two feints before he found knuckle room on the side of Split-Finger's jaw.

Then Hammer Harmon, moving in with an all-consuming rush of his own, battered Willie Shrike down.

A kind of collective sigh welled up from the townsmen. Three of the Thunderbolt Kid's top gunners—knocked down, humiliated, and their guns taken away! It was a day the men of Rolling Rock had never expected to see.

The three hardcases got up and skulked away, Willie Shrike calling over his shoulder, "We'll be back!"

That was all the threat needed to shroud the townsmen again in a blue fog of despair. The past examples of the Thunderbolt Kid's outrages in the valley were all too fresh. This horse-faced stranger who had sardonically claimed to be a dancing master—and had proved it—had undoubtedly meant well. But his actions had inevitably put the death brand on Hammer Harmon, and likely on some of the rest.

But Lightning Ben seemed utterly unaware of the damper that had been put on the crowd by Willie Shrike's muttered threat. A somber smile lit his long face.

"Well," he led off with enthusiasm, "did we teach 'em to dance, or did we teach 'em to dance?"

"*You* did, pardner," Hammer Harmon said. He smiled too, but soberly. He wasn't unappreciative of being pried out from under those guns but he was mindful, too, of the danger to come, and he was wondering how he could get rid of the stranger without hurting his feelings. "Don't think it'll do you any good to set up your pitch in this town, pardner," he warned. "You've got off on the wrong foot with the people who run things here."

CHAPTER TWO

"You'll Never Leave Here In One Piece!"

LIGHTNING BEN was puffing fiercely on his stogy. "Wait a minute, blacksmith. You think that I'm runnin' a bunko game with my danc-

in' machine? Hell's hot potatoes, you got me wrong as rain on the Fourth of July. This dancin' stunt, it jus' seemed to develop at the spur of the moment. What I use my electric machine for is to demonstrate the force and the amazin' nature of lightnin'."

Hammer Harmon scratched his head. "Why-for?"

"Didn't I tell you? I represent the Big Jove Lightnin' Conductor Company, of East St. Louis, Illinois." Lightning Ben took a fresh pull at the stogy. "You got lightnin' here, ain't you? No, don't answer. Statistics show you got more of it in Storm Valley than in any other spot on the grass frontier. So the Big Jove sales manager says to me, 'Ben, there's your territory. Go out and conduct the lightnin' for those fellas.' "

Hammer Harmon, and all of them, still looked puzzled.

"First off when I hit a town," Lightnin' Ben went on, "I look up the blacksmith to help me install these Big Jove lightnin' rods."

"I get it," Hammer Harmon said. sell lightnin' rods."

"Mister, I sell enough Big Jove lightnin' rods that if they was put end to end you could use 'em for a railroad track from here to Philadelphia—"

"That's what you've got in the wagon, friend?"

"Nothin' different. In back of the electric machine, I'm loaded to the gunnels with lightnin' rods."

"Who you aim to sell 'em to?" The question was hurled in bitterness by one of the men standing in the doorway.

The drummer barked back, "Ain't a ranch house in Storm Valley that wouldn't benefit by a application of Big Jove lightnin' rods."

"We ain't questionin' the value of the rods, drummer. We're just tellin' you there ain't nobody to buy 'em."

"Why ain't there? I see some mighty prosperous lookin' little spreads on the way in here."

Hammer Harmon moved closer to the drummer, said earnestly, "It's this way, friend. There's a gun-fisted killer that's pleased to call himself the Thunderbolt Kid on account of the reputation this valley's got for thunder and lightnin', I reckon. He's moved in on us with a pack of gun-wolves, and account of his organized cheatin', stealin', destroyin', and killin', he's got this valley sewed up so tight that what he ain't run out is workin' fer him—workin' their own spreads, but Thunderbolt collects all the dinero. That's why you won't sell none of your lightnin' rods here.

"The Thunderbolt Kid ain't spendin' no money in permanent investments. He aims to skim the cream, hangin' on till the law moves onto our range. Then he'll ride on. But by that time we'll all be dead in the poorhouse—if there was any poorhouse."

"Why," the drummer said, "I never heard the like. It's scan'lous. You mean this Thunderbolt hellion's got every last outfit in the valley sewed up?"

"All but Old Enoch Enderlee's KV. It's the biggest spread of the bunch. You must of seen the ranch house when you rode in. Old Enoch give all his cowboys shootin' orders, and they been hangin' on out there by the skin of their teeth. But it won't be for long. Thunderbolt's bringin' in new gunners every day. He'll be strikin' at the KV pret-near immediate, I'm thinkin'."

"Why, then I better be sellin' Enoch Enderlee some rods while he's still there to buy 'em."

A man from the crowd growled, "You might be a go-getter from East St. Louis, Illinois, but right now you ain't goin' anywheres or gettin' anything."

"Why ain't I?" the drummer demanded belligerently.

"Cause look what's comin'!"

A stir of alarm went through the watchers as they turned. They started spreading back hastily from the door.

"Why," the drummer snorted, "it's only them same three. Them and a stumpy little runt ugly as a mud fence that's settin' the pace for 'em."

"That stumpy little runt, drummer," a voice struck hoarsely from the crowd, "is the Thunderbolt Kid hisself!"

★

THE drummer had been reaching inside the wagon, clattering an assortment of lightning rod sections. "Why, now," he said, "that's fine. Maybe I can sell him some lightnin' rods." He drew back with a stiletto-like piece of metal some five feet long. It had green glass insulators on it and was drawn out to a fine point on one end. "This Thunderbolt fella might be, like everybody says, a tough customer. But I've handled tough customers before."

The blacksmith touched Lightning Ben's arm and said with swift urgency, "You don't know what you're buckin', friend. This is a surefire boothill play. There's a back door to my shop. You light out, and sudden."

"You goin' too?" Lightning Ben demanded.

Fear—honest and unashamed fear—touched the blacksmith's face. But it was evident in the set of his bulldog jaw that he wasn't letting that fear control him.

"I'm stayin'," he said simply.

"Why?" Lightning Ben asked with a strange gentleness. "It'll be a boothill play for you, too, won't it?"

"It's like to be, yeah. But I've made up my mind, drummer. I've quit runnin'."

"Life ain't so important to you, maybe?"

Hammer Harmon could have told him a book about that. He could have told about Nancy Enderlee . . . no other girl like Nancy, none as sweet or as pretty. And Nancy was his—or would be soon. It made Hammer Harmon tremble, just thinking about Nancy.

"Life ain't important?" he whipped. "It's because it *is* so important that I got to stay and face these hellions. It's hard to explain to a outsider. But somebody's got to make a stand somewhere along the line, or life won't be worth livin' for nobody."

Lightning Ben nodded sympathetically. "Reckon I catch your drift. Jus' don't you force the showdown, blacksmith, till I've had a chance to lambaste 'em with my sales talk."

The watchers had scattered well back from the door by the time the four gunmen came up and stopped just inside the shop.

"That's him, chief." Willie Shrike indicated Lightning Ben, his fingers drumming nervously at his gun-handle.

The Thunderbolt Kid stared. With his thick neck wide shoulders, short thick legs, he looked something like a high-cut stump. There wasn't much more expression in his face, either, than in a stump. But for all of that, he seemed to exude a furious power, an all-pervading evil force.

His tight mouth cracked open. "So this is the pilgrim who takes the bolts outa thunderbolts, huh?"

"Nothin' different, mister," Lightning Ben put in for himself. "If I understand it right, you're the big property owner around here so you're the man I want to talk to. The Big Jove Lightnin' Conductor Company of East St. Louis, Illinois, can rig up your buildin's with rods that carry a positive guarantee to take the bolts out of every thunderbolt that might come out of the sky. Why, I've sold so many rods that if they was laid end to end they'd make a railroad track from here to the Golden Gate—"

"Frisco, or Heaven? Which gate?"

The Thunderbolt Kid wasn't laughing. Even his eyes showed no hint of amusement. But his apparent willingness to meet the drummer's gab with some of his own, made him seem more human. The ring of watchers from outside the building relaxed a little.

What the Kid said next reassured them more. Turning to Willie Shrike, he remarked, "I thought you said this long sad son was a bunko artist. It appears he's only a lightnin'-rod salesman. I even kind of like the wide-talkin' buzzard. A man that can talk you three out of your guns—it's even possible I could use him in my business."

Willie Shrike blinked in helpless rage. Then he turned his wrath full on Hammer Harmon. "What about the blacksmith? *He* ain't goin' to be no use to you. And I got a grudge agin' him the same as agin' the bunko man."

At the Thunderbolt Kid's next words the townsmen were telling themselves in stark dismay that they should have known better than to feel even a little bit easy in the gunman's presence.

What the Kid said was: "The blacksmith? Why, sure. I can't use no blacksmith. Amuse yourself, boys. It's time the sheep around here was taught another lesson, anyhow."

This time it wasn't going to be a business of bouncing lead off an anvil. There was a murderous glint in Willie Shrike's close-set eyes, and Willie Shrike wasn't the only one. They were all honing for the kill. But Willie Shrike's jitter-finger would trigger a shade faster than the others.

So it looked as though Hammer Harmon had to die. And Nancy Enderlee, who had nearly lost a brother to the Thunderbolters' gun-hunger, now stood to lose a lover.

Hammer Harmon threw a last appealing glance at the drummer, who was standing there holding his fine-pointed lightning rod, apparently unaware of the murder that was in the making. The drummer was even opening his wide mouth to continue his sales talk at the instant Willie Shrike yanked his gun.

"Take it, blacksmith!" Willie Shrike bit out the words.

Hammer Harmon made a desperate lunge in the direction of his forge.

But he didn't have to dodge! The way it turned out, Willie Shrike wasn't as much of a menace as the other two gunnies were. That was because the drummer bought in.

The black-garbed drummer looked angular and awkward. But the rod he held in his hands for demonstration purposes was already pointed straight out. He leaned forward, aiming with the front hand, propelling with the back one, at the instant Willie Shrike started his gun-play.

The lightning rod traveled like a spear, with the light from the forge fire glinting on its polished needle point.

It was only a short drive, and it was so fast that it was impossible at first for everyone to grasp what had happened. But Willie Shrike's shriek of rage and pain broke with shuddering loudness as that needled point slithered in under his gun and pierced his hand. His gun clattered to the floor along with the lightning rod.

But Willie Shrike's pards weren't hampered. Split-Finger Joe Boyle and Rance Dalzell were still drawing.

Yet a split-wink afterwards they were thinking that maybe Willie was the lucky one after all. Hammer Harmon's lunge had carried him to his forge and his huge-muscled hands had closed around the shovel handle. The shovel was stuck deep in the pile of unburned charcoal atop the forge.

The blacksmith swept the shovel forward into the bed of hot glowing charcoal, swung it clear of the forge, full of red-hot coals. He let go shovel and all in the

direction of Split-Finger Joe Boyle and Rance Dalzell.

As the shower of fire came at them, they let out a squall, dropped their guns and started beating furiously at the hot coals that clung in their clothing.

For the moment, then, all three hardcases were out of the gunning again. Hammer Harmon, in the fighting frenzy that ran in his blood, could exult about that. Three of them out of the gunning!

That left only the most deadly triggerman of the lot—the Thunderbolt Kid! And both the blacksmith and the drummer were empty-handed before his draw!

Maybe he shouldn't have taken time to gloat over the thunderbolt impact of each bullet he intended to drive into the blacksmith and the drummer. Because in the fractional second he took to brace himself the blast, he found himself looking dead-center into the drummer's sixgun.

From somewhere within that drooping black-tailed coat, that hung like a shroud on his angular frame, Lighting Ben had clawed out a long-barreled six shooter.

The Thunderbolt Kid came within an ace of completing his draw, but his brain took over from his trigger finger; he dropped his gun, and spread his hands wide.

"I'm in the air!" he bawled.

"So now looks like a good time to finish my plug for Big Jove lightnin' rods," the drummer boomed in his deep, vibrating voice. "From all accounts I got only two customers in Storm Valley—you and a fella they call Enoch Enderlee. I can see old man Enderlee later. Right now I'm interested in gettin' a order out of you. How's about it, Stump? You've seen the good quality of Big Jove rods. The tips are pointed almost needle sharp so's they can fork the lightnin' from the sky as easy as forkin' your gunnie's shootin' hand.

"Now, Stumpy, there's three parts to these lightnin' defangers of mine, an' they're all necessary to draw the bolts from the thunderbolts. First, there's—"

"I'll take some," the Thunderbolt Kid interrupted hoarsely. He didn't want to take any more chances with his hawk-nosed stranger's brand of bunko. "I'll take some," he blared again.

Lightning Ben looked pleased. "That's fine," he said. "I know you won't regret your purchase, sir. Now I'll tell you what you do. We'll skip the details for now. You and your boys just dig down in your pockets and shell out whatever gold or currency you got on you. Jus' toss it down on the floor in front of you. Don't overlook none, on account the blacksmith'll be lookin' you over after, and I can tell by the build of him it makes him mad if anybody holds out."

The Thunderbolt Kid, shelling out, looked at Willie Shrike, and snarled, "And you said he was a bunko artist! He's just a plain hold-up."

Lightning Ben assumed an injured expression. "Hurts me to hear you talk like that. A Big Jove drummer's got sensibilities, even if folks don't think so. I ain't robbin' you; this is only a down payment you're makin' to bind the deal."

"You know you ain't gettin' away with this, don't you?" the Thunderbolt Kid jabbed. "Nobody takes guns and money from us and lives to brag about it. You'll never leave Storm Valley in one piece, drummer."

"That's somethin' I'll worry about when the time comes," Lightning Ben drawled. He waved his gun. "Just keep emptyin' the pockets, boys.

CHAPTER THREE

Ride of the Thunderbolt Wagon

AFTER the gunners had gone, with their empty holsters and empty pockets, the gaping watchers clustered around Hammer Harmon, slapping

his back, pumping his hand. They were too excited to talk straight. They could hardly believe one of their number had stood up to the Thunderbolt Kid's threat and still lived.

Their attitude toward Lightning Ben Ringo was different. The drummer stood a little aside, smoking his stogy. He was a strangely gaunt and lonely looking individual. They looked upon him with respect, certainly—but also with a certain amount of fear.

He was not like any man they had ever known. He had bucked the Thunderbolters, first with the tools of his own trade, then with the tools of *their* trade—six-guns. At the end he had robbed from the robbers. Lightning Ben Ringo was strong meat for the men of Storm Valley . . . . A little too strong to be slapped and hand-pumped in a familiar manner.

One man even found voice to criticize. He was Hefty Carmine, hard-hitting segundo of Enoch Enderlee's KV. "When you had 'em under your gun, drummer," he demanded, "why, in the name of Tophet, you leave 'em go?"

"They're customers of mine, ain't they?" Lightning Ben demanded sardonically. "Can't mistreat a customer. That's one of the first rules of trade."

They stared at him in uneasy, puzzled silence.

He laughed dryly. "Jus' jokin' boys. It's thisaway, see: When an evil has rooted down as deep as it has in Storm Valley, you can't cure it by jus' choppin' off a stalk, 'cause more stalks keep growin'. You got to yank the evil up by the roots. It's the only way."

More silence; then a man's voice came through. "That's strange talk for a drummer. Was you, maybe, a sky pilot once?"

Lightning Ben blew out smoke. "I been called a lot of things. But never a preacher before."

Hammer Harmon said respectfully, "What you were meanin', Mr. Ringo, is that it ain't just enough to squash the leaders. That's it, ain't it? The pack's so used to feedin' on us by now, that they'd just find other leaders. We got to exterminate the whole pack, once and final."

"That's the way I'm seein' it," Lightnin' Ben agreed. "But first you've got to rid yourselves of your fears, and quit waitin' for a miracle to happen. A man's most often got to make his own miracles."

"Listen, drummer," a man's troubled voice protested, "we're only workin' folks and citizens, tryin' to make a livin'. Our tools that we're used to workin' with ain't sixguns. How you expect us to buck up agin' professional gunmen, and live to tell about it?"

"There's ways," Lightning Ben said solemnly. "How about importin' you a professional town-tamer? If you all got together and backed him up the best you could—"

"Who you suggestin', drummer?" Hefty Carmine demanded.

"Suggestin' nobody. That's your business. Reckon I've horned in too much already."

"Like you say, Mr. Ringo," Hammer Harmon put in quickly, "there's men that throw their lead for the law, but they come high. Already we been stripped to the hide. We ain't got the price."

"I move around a lot," Lightning Ben said, "And I've heard talk about one such that don't charge nothin'. He ranges jus' about everywhere. He hates range-hogs and gun-bullies, and where the local law ain't strong enough to keep 'em down, he's been known to come in and size up the situation and gun 'em clean to perdition —afore they even knew he was amongst 'em!"

"They's only one man fits that drummer," a man from the crowd said loudly. "That's Len Siringo."

A stir went up at mention of that almost fabulous free-lance lawman. Len

Siringo—the name had a magic to it for oppressed men everywhere along the gold or the cattle-range frontier.

"We've already sent for him, drummer," a man flung in. "But shucks, a gent of his reputation—he's got too many calls on him, I reckon. He's had time to get here if he was comin', and if he don't come soon it'll be too late, what with the way the Thunderbolt Kid's pilin' new hardcases in on every stage."

"Supposin' he did come," Lightning Ben questioned, "you fellas prepared to back him to the limit?"

A brooding silence hung on his words. Then Hammer Harmon laughed fiercely, and said, "I plumb branded myself today, so nothin' I can say can put me in any more hot water. Trouble here, drummer, since you're askin', is that there's a low-down sell-out amongst us. Every man's afraid to raise his voice in protest at the plague that's bein' put upon us, on account he knows the news'll be carried to the Thunderbolt Kid. That's how young Steve Enderlee got his. They near killed Enderlee—and some sidewindin' informer was to blame."

★

THE drummer bent and picked up the lightning rod that had Willie Shrike's drying blood on it. He started toward his wagon. "Reckon I'll get about my business," he said.

"Where you headed?" Hammer Harmon asked tensely.

"Where you think? Enderlee's KV. Didn't you tell me that was my only other possible customer in Storm Valley?"

Hefty Carmine, the KV foreman, squinted at Lightning Ben from under black-bushed eyebrows. "You're wastin' your time."

"Why? Ain't Enderlee progressive?

"Sure he's progressive. And he's a-needin' lightnin' rods. I've heard him say it more'n once that a man was a double-distilled fool to try and get along in Storm Valley without 'em. But that was afore the Thunderbolt Kid started crowdin' us. Like as not, if he put 'em up now, he'd only be decoratin' his buildin's for the Thunderbolt Kid."

"You mean he's goin' to knuckle under to the Kid, like everybody else has around here?"

"Not much, he ain't!" Hefty Carmine flared. He'll keep fightin'. But he ain't blind. He can see the finish, plain as anybody else."

"That ain't the proper speerit to go into a fight," the drummer chided. "If I went at it thataway, I'd never sell me any lightnin' rods. An' I'm goin' to sell your boss some lightnin' rods, mister."

"I'm wishin' you luck," Hefty Carmine said tragically. "You'll sure as hell need it!"

Lightning Ben moved on to his wagon.

"You're forgettin' your, now, down-payment," a man called after him, and indicated the small piles of gold and currency that the Thunderbolt Kid's outfit had shucked out on the floor.

"Oh, that," Lightning Ben said carelessly. He looked back. "This Thunderbolt fella must of caused considerable grief around here. He's maybe even left a few widders or orphans."

"Both," a man said starkly.

"In that case," Lightning Ben said, "you fellas spread this money around where it'll do the most good."

They stared at him.

Lightning Ben said, "You don't want to be squeamish about it. I took it from Thunderbolt, sure; but he took it from you folks first."

"It ain't *that*," a man assured him hastily. "It's just—just that we're some throwed by your generosity, stranger. It's been so long since anything but plain bad luck came our way—"

"Always darkest, they say, jus' afore

daylight." Lightning Ben started climbing on his wagon.

Hammer Harmon unfastened his leather apron and threw it down. "Wait a minute." he called. "I'll ride out with you. I might as well be shot for a gander as a goose. Enoch Enderlee's the only one that's still buckin' the Thunderbolt Kid in the open. I'm throwin' in with him!"

Lightning Ben looked down from his wagon. "Anybody else want a free ride out to Enderlee's?"

One by one they found it impossible to meet his oddly burning eyes. They looked away, they shifted uneasily where they stood. Then, shamefacedly, one man answered for them all, "We got our women and kids to think about, drummer. If there was an outside chance. . . . But against the Thunderbolt Kid—"

"Gid-dap," Lightning Ben clucked to his team.

Hefty Carmine shouted after him, "There's a few the KV boys in town. I'll round 'em up, and we'll come ridin' to give you a escort. You can look for us somewhere's along the trail. I don't think you'll be sellin' any lightnin' rods, but I'm still wishin' you luck!"

WITH Hammer Harmon holding down the seat with him, Lightning Ben rolled his big, high-sided wagon out of town. They creaked along over a muddy trail fast drying out under the beat of the sun. To each side of them the lush land rolled back in soft green slopes. Storm Valley grew good grass—none better anywhere.

It took them a good three hours of heavy pulling over the valley flats before they approached the high pole bridge that Enoch Enderlee had had constructed over the canyon.

Lightning Ben let his eyes rove admiringly over the super-structure of the bridge. "Quite a piece of engineerin' work there," he observed.

"Old Enoch bossed the job," Hammer Harmon said. "It was too long a span to trust them poles complete, so Enoch rigged them high stanchions up at either end, and run a couple dozen wires down to hold some of the weight."

"You figure it'll hold us with this load?"

"Hold anything on wheels."

"It's easy seventy foot down to hard rock. These lightnin' rods of mine would make some smash."

"You don't need to worry."

Lightning Ben stopped his team just short of the bridge, and turned to Hammer Harmon. "You don't feel a mite uneasy about anything?"

"Huh? Why no. . . . Exceptin' maybe about Hefty Carmine. I thought him and the KV boys'd be along before this. He's a hot-tempered hombre. I only hope he didn't go and mix it with the Kid on the Kid's home grounds."

"It's the bridge I'm talkin' about."

"What's the matter with it?"

Lightning Ben put the break blocks to the wheels, and stepped to the ground. Puzzled, Hammer Harmon followed him.

"Been horses here since the rain," Hammer observed. He pointed to the hoof marks on the slope that cut sharply to the creek bed.

"That's the first I noticed," Lightning Ben said. "See anything else?"

"No . . . Yeah! Somethin' glintin' over there. Could be a pair of cutters."

They went thirty feet down the gravelly bank. "Cutters, all right," Hammer Harmon said. "I can see from here. No fence to ride anywhere this side the ranch house. So what would anybody be doin' with cutters here?"

Lightning Ben reached the cutters and picked them up. He and Hammer both bent over them.

"Been cuttin' bigger wire'n they were

ever meant for, looks like," Lightning Ben said tightly. "Let's go back to the bridge and see what we see."

At the bridge they saw plenty. It wasn't a thing a man would notice, just driving along. But looking close, it was easy enough to see.

Hammer Harmon turned a shocked face to Lightning Ben. "Someone's cut mighty-near all the way through every one of them supportin' wires! "An' if we'd drove over the bridge we'd of been gonners!"

"Yeah."

Hammer Harmon took a deep adjusting breath. "The Thunderbolt Kid made the brag that you'd never leave the valley in one piece!"

"You figger that's who it was?"

"Who else could it be?"

Lightning Ben shrugged. "How would I know? I'm a stranger here."

Doing his thinking out loud, Hammer Harmon said, "He had time to ride ahead of us here, the way we've been draggin' with this load. Takin' his bronc down that wash, he could of easy dropped the cutters. . . ."

"You know a place where we can ford the creek?"

"Yeah, I can show you a place. But what about this bridge? We better leave a warnin' for Hefty Carmine and the KV boys."

"It's still safe enough for most anything short of a load of iron lightnin' conductors. Come on."

Safely on the other side of Snake Creek canyon, and back on the trail, Lightning Ben urged the horses along as fast as the load and the weather allowed.

Hammer Harmon was still a little shaken by their narrow escape at the bridge. "Sure glad this range lies flat to the sky," he said, "or I'd be lookin' for an ambush pocket."

Lightning Ben nodded. "Open country all the way, ain't it?"

"Right up to the hill Enderlee's house sets on. That's why he'd be a welcome customer for your rods at any ordinary time. The house sets up there on the hill, a open invitation for every thunderbolt."

Maybe an hour after they had crossed the canyon, Lightning Ben looked back over the trail and said, "Riders comin'."

CHAPTER FOUR

Valley of Doom

HAMMER HARMON told him, "Then that'll be Hefty Carmine and his boys, I reckon. About time they was showin'. I'll sure feel easier with them along."

"There's a good pair of glasses in the seat alongside you," Lightning Ben said. "Take a squint."

Hammer fitted the glasses to his eyes and looked back. "It—it ain't Hefty!" he gasped. "It's the Kid and his pack, comin' up fast. They muffed it at the bridge. Now they're aimin' to ride in and gun us. And us with no more cover'n a rabbit in a open skillet!"

"Travelin' in new country, I always aim to forstall trouble," Lightning Ben said mildly. "Loosen that tarp behind you. I've got the lightnin' conductors piled so there's just enough space in the middle where a couple men could squat and duck lead, while handin' it out."

"But there's anyhow ten of them! How's our two guns goin' to count?"

"You fellas in Storm Valley are the most pessimistical cusses I ever did see!" Lightning Ben declared. He stirred in his seat, ready to follow Hammer Harmon back to the gun nest among the lightning rods.

Long-range bullets began to pelt around them.

By the time they were both snugged away behind their lightning rod barricade,

gun thunder was breaking in a sullen roar behind them. A few slugs splintered the wagon tail boards and drove into the iron.

"They're closin' the range all the time," Hammer Harmon said desperately. "We ain't got a chance."

Then he saw Lightning Ben hauling a rifle out from among the conductors.

Lightning Ben shot deliberately. But every time the heavy gun roared, the lead emptied a saddle from among the bunch coming up from behind.

With three men down, the rest suddenly quit the chase, fanning out from the trail in all directions, holding low against the off-side of their horses for cover.

Lightning Ben put down his rifle. "Reckon that's all there is to it," he said dryly. "It's right evident they ain't packin' rifles of their own. By the time they can get back to town and get 'em, we'll be at Enderlee's place."

Hammer Harmon grinned admiringly. "You sure are prepared to push your lightnin' rod sales in hostile country!"

"I keep watchful," Lightning Ben admitted.

At the KV they were also watchful. As the freighter neared the high rounded hill with the big ranch house perched on top, three gun-weighted riders came out to challenge them.

Hammer Harmon vouched for Lightning Ben Ringo. The riders accepted the enthusiastic introduction with a brooding silence.

"What's the matter?" Hammer Harmon demanded.

"They got young Steve," a rider clipped harshly. "Did more'n wing him this time. Killed him!"

Shocked, Hammer Harmon asked, "From ambush, like before?"

"Yeah."

"Steve Enderlee's son," Hammer Harmon explained. "Nancy's kid brother. She—Nancy'll be frantic-wild about this!"

They rode on, up the rise of the hill, through the scattering of catclaw and scrub piñon. They met Enoch Enderlee on the wide porch that ran around two sides of the massive house. Enderlee was one of the old-timers who had come in when the buffalo were a black cloud on the plains. He had started out with a few longhorns, and through the years built his herd up to the prime quality it was now.

Since the Indian days he had fought against man and nature to hold what he had built. He was still fighting, now that the Thunderbolt Kid had spread his blight across the valley and quelled lesser men into sullen submission which was the forerunner of slavery.

But the killing of his only son had hit him hard. He was hardly aware of Lightning Ben as he mumbled an acknowledgement to Hammer Harmon's introduction on the ranch house porch.

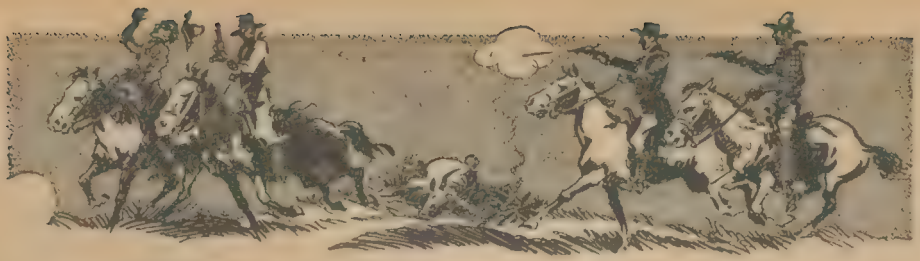
With a warmly human insight into the old man's feelings, Lightning Ben said, "This is no time to be talkin' business with you, Mr. Enderlee. You likely know the merits of Big Jove lightnin' rods anyhow. So with your permission, Mr. Harmon and me will just go ahead and lightnin'-proof your house with 'em at no fuss to you at all, and at no worryment about payment. If you like 'em, you can pay me later, whenever you've got the money. Take all the time you want."

Enoch Enderlee shook himself out of his lethargy long enough to sweep Lightning Ben with a piercing glance. "You mean I don't have to sign no paper?"

"That's right."

The old rancher pinched nervously at a gallus and forced a thin smile. "Don't see what I've got to lose in the deal. Go ahead. Stick up rods all over the place if you want." His veined hand lifted to shade his eyes as he looked down-trail. "Here comes Hefty Carmine and the boys from town, I reckon."

(Continued on page 128)



Up the Trail

FROM this distance, we're willing to bet that when the history of this war is written there will be no more thrilling chapters than those devoted to that small group of reckless, highly-trained dare-devils called the Commandos. Their exploits in raiding against heavy odds; their sheer bravery, backed by their skill in personal combat have brought a ray of hope to Norway and France, to name only two of the captive nations.

Without detracting from any of their glory, we'd like to draw a parallel. It is this: Throughout our Western frontier there were the same kind of reckless, do-or-die gents who were willing to gamble their lives against impossible odds to win freedom for themselves and their loved ones. And the exploits of such reckless hell-for-leather characters—in fictional form—bring back the real rawhide-and-iron spirit that was, above all else, characteristic of our early frontier.

For example, there is much of that salty, fast-moving flavor in Walt Coburn's new novel, "Blood-Money Bronc Twister," which will appear in the next issue. There we'll meet a fighting bronc-buster, Rastus Brown, who woke up with an aching head in the jail at La Croix Crossing, on the Powder River, charged with murdering the crooked boss of the town. With him is the grizzled old round-up cook Flapjack Sid; who—out of sheer loyalty to the youngster—got himself thrown into the same jail by heaving a quart bottle through the plate-glass window of the dead gambler's honkytonk.

Flapjack, pretending to be drunker than he actually was, started singing the song about Rufus Rastus Johnson Brown at the top of his leather lungs, while the bronc-twister worked with soap and a hacksaw blade which the loyal cook had been able to smuggle inside the place. . . .

Fatty Jenkins, the jailer, waddling down the corridor outside the cell door swung his weight around with a wheezy oath. "Damn! Don't you know ary other tune but that? Brown, you an' this grub-spoiler tryin' on somethin'?"

He had fetched the lantern and the jail keys. He was a mountain of a man, tipping the scales at well over three hundred.

As he came to the dark cell, holding the lantern high, Rastus, quick as a cat, leaped atop the big jailer. Fatty Jenkins was toppled over by the swift, dangerous attack, and his wheezy voice died away in a belly-grunt. Knocked cold, Rastus took the keys, lantern and gun. He had saved the lighted lantern from breaking by a quick grab.

"Sing, Flapjack, sing," he panted, "while I do some thinkin'!"

Outside were the raucous shouts of men crowding toward the jail. They were LaCroix' hangers-on!

Rastus' lips tightened decisively. He slipped toward the jail front door, bolted on the inside, with the round-up cook following. He found his own six-shooter, buckled it on, and helped himself to a sawed-off shotgun. He slipped open the jail door.

"You comin', Flapjack?"

"Ever know me to quit you in a tight?"

They went out together, keeping to the shadows.

More than a dozen men outside had lanterns and torches and were armed with clubs and guns. A burly bouncer had a rope with a noose tied in a crude hangman's knot.

"Stand away from the door, Fatty," called the big man with the noose, "or we'll tromp this tallow belly of yourn—"

Then he realized something was wrong. He hesitated, and the others behind him started crowding forward.

Back inside the jail, Fatty Jenkins was shouting and bellowing.

"Quit cussin' Fatty," sung out someone. "We want that bronc-twistin' killer! Trot 'im out. Charge the jail, boys. We're havin' us a necktie party!"

"Try it, and it'll be your hard-luck." Rastus Brown's voice was flat-toned. "Me an' my pardner have a couple of sawed-off ten-gauges in our hands. Bunched up like you are, we can't miss. Drop your guns, but keep hold of them lanterns. Herd 'em along, Flapjack!"

Rastus Brown and Flapjack stepped aside, one on either side of the jail door.

The men started forward, sullen and slow-moving. And when the last man was inside, Flapjack told them to slam the door shut.

Rastus shoved home the iron bar that locked it from the outside. Then he leaped back out of range as a fusillade of shots tore through the heavy planks. Flapjack let out a snarling grunt, slumped, then caught himself, as Rastus grabbed him.

"We got to run for it, Flapjack!" he panted. "It's now or never!"

That's a good sample of what kind of tough hombres Rastus Brown and Flapjack were. But they'd be called upon to show more courage than that before they were through, for Rastus had to get his wounded pardner to the nearest medico. . . . Only to find a cold-eyed owlhoot doc, who decided that he himself could collect on the hide of old Flapjack—and so sent Rastus out to get the blood-money to buy his pardner's freedom!

How he does it, and the desperate, lone-hand fight he must make form one of the most powerful stories which have yet come from the pen of this gifted cowboy-author. We'll meet these two frontier Commandos—along with many other strong fictional characters, in the next issue, published Oct. 2nd!

(Continued from page 126)

THIS time it *was* Hefty Carmine, and no mistake. He and his boys rode in fast and unhorsed.

"We missed you," the segundo said to Lightning Ben. "You must of left the trail."

"We left the trail all right," Hammer Harmon put in. He told why, then said, "If we'd followed your directions, Hefty, we'd both be bullet bait now."

"How come?"

"You said for us not to worry if we seen a bunch of riders bearin' down on us, that it'd be you and the KV boys. Lucky for us, the drummer here is a natural born worryin' fool. He put the glasses on some riders afore they got close. It wasn't you; it was the Kid! The drummer knocked three of 'em out of saddle afore they got close enough to do any good with their sixguns. It's a wonder, Hefty, you didn't meet some of them gunnies on your way in."

Hefty Carmine accorded the drummer a respectful stare. "That's one for our side, anyhow." Then the unnatural tension that hung over everybody seeped to him. "What's the matter?"

They told him Steve was dead.

He shook his head in slow sympathy. "I hate to pile tough news on top of that," he said, his gruff voice unnaturally gentle. "But it looks like showdown all around for us, Enoch. We've been scoutin' the set-up in town. The Kid's only waitin' for some top-ace gunners he's got hired. They're due in any time, and then he's comin' down on us in force. With the men we've got I don't see how we're goin' to hold the herds and the ranch house too."

Enoch Enderlee looked at him balefully. "You suggestin' we quit?"

"You know me better'n that," Hefty said gruffly. "Though neither me nor any of the boys signed on with you as fightin' hands, you've treated us right, and we'll see you through. I was just wisin' you to what we're up against, that's all. It'll make some tough chawin'."

Enoch Enderlee turned grimly to Lightning Ben, his worn hands empty. "You see how it is, drummer? You're liable to have to collect from the Thunderbolt Kid for your conductors."

"I'll take the risk. Anyhow, from the Kid I collect cash."

Hammer Harmon excused himself and went in the house to look for Nancy, and to do what he could to comfort her. Tragedy, double-fanged and black, was hanging over this house. Hefty Carmine and the KV waddies went off toward the corrals, and Lightning Ben had a moment alone with Enoch Enderlee.

"Something I'd like to show you." Lightning Ben produced the wire cutters from his freighter.

The old rancher stared at them dully for a moment. Then his eyes lighted up. "They're mine! My best pair of cutters. And damn near ruined." He looked suspiciously at Lightning Ben. "You been cuttin' up your lightnin' rods with 'em, or what? Where'd you get 'em?"

Lightning Ben told him what had happened at the bridge. Blows had fallen so thick and fast on Enoch Enderlee's gray head, that he only stared, muttering tone-

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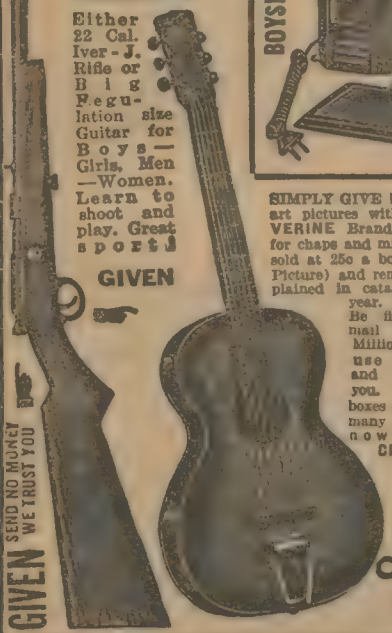

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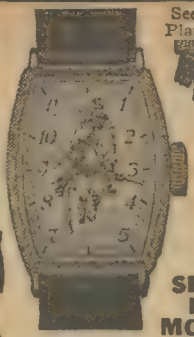

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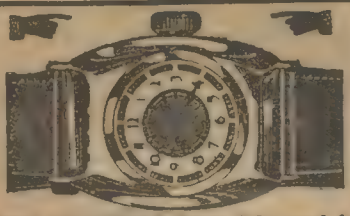

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lessly, "It had to be the Kid, of course. But I wonder where he got hold of my cutters?"

"I'm wonderin' likewise," Lightning Ben affirmed.

Hammer Harmon came out of the house soon afterwards and helped Len put the horses up. Then they went to work "decorating the house" with the lightning rods, as old man Enderlee called it. Enderlee sent a couple more men to help, and the work progressed rapidly.

Nancy Enderlee came out in the yard and watched them for a while.

"Right honored, ma'am," Lightning Ben said in answer to Hammer Harmon's introduction.

The wind that blew forever in Storm Valley tugged at her dress of fresh summer gingham, moulding her figure, and putting her hair in soft disarray. Her eyes, gray and large, were sad, but not even sorrow could hide her fresh and unassuming beauty.

This girl of Hammer Harmon's, Lightning Ben had to admit, was all that the blacksmith had said. Now and again Lightning Ben caught her glance on him. It was a questioning glance, and forlornly admiring. It touched the lonely heart of the lightning rod drummer, oddly saddened him.

Distantly in Storm Valley, thunder rolled again that night, sky thunder and lightning daggered, portending the thunder-roar and flash of guns that must follow.

Lightning Ben was in his room, alone, in a wing of the big two-story house when Nancy Enderlee with her father came seeking him. He knew in a second it was no ordinary visit.

The girl's face, wan still from her bereavement, at the same time seemed to glow from some glad inner excitement. Lightning Ben caught her eyes, large and lusterous, perhaps reflecting some breathless hope.

He felt that certainly here was a girl whose frontier spirit had lifted her above her sorrows, and above her fears. She was one who would never quit while there were things worth fighting for. And it was easy to see that she was bursting with a secret that needed telling.

When she spoke, though, it was to ask, "Where's Hammer? He's been gone ever since supper."

"He's movin' around the valley," Lightning Ben said, "on an errand that's like to take him all night, and maybe all day tomorrow."

"Errand? Who's errand?"

"I reckon I suggested it, ma'am."

"But," she said, dismayed, "he didn't tell me anything about it. He didn't even say good-by."

"Reckon you can blame me for that too, ma'am. I cautioned him some to secrecy."

Nancy bit at her lip. Then suddenly, warmly, she smiled. "It's all right. Whatever you do—it's all right. Because you see, we—we think we know something. About you." She flushed, talked faster. "We were talking about it after supper. It all ties up. The things you've done since you've come to the valley this morning aren't ordinary things. They—they're almost unbelievable. And you do work that way, don't you? I mean you come in as just an ordinary person, a farmer, a store-keeper, a doctor. . . . And now a man selling lightning rods! Lightning Ben Ringo! It's really not your right name, is it? Your right name—it's Len Siringo! Isn't it?" She came closer. "Isn't it?"

LIGHTING BEN bowed shortly, feeling almost humble in the presence of this lovely, glowing girl. "At your service, ma'am," his deep voice rumbled.

"I knew it—oh, I *knew* it! Len Siringo! And you're here. In our house. You've helped people everywhere, I guess. I've

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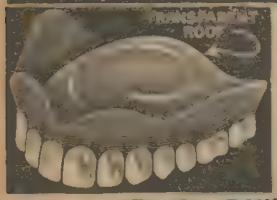

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heard about you in ever so many places . . . and now you're here, helping us. Everything seems all right now. . . ."

Len Siringo hemmed and hawed. "Leave me ask one: This after-supper talk you mentioned, when you decided I must be who I am, who'd you have it with?"

Enoch Enderlee said, "My foreman was there—Hefty Carmine."

Len nodded. "How'd he act about it?"

"Why—just overpowerin' glad, the same as all of us."

"Where is he now?"

"I ain't seen him. He got up and left right after, sorta hurried. Said he'd better go out an' see about tryin' to save what stock he could."

"You tell him about findin' the wire cutters?"

"Shore did."

"How'd he act?"

"Just—surprised. How else would he act? What you got in your craw?"

"How long you had him?"

" 'Bout a year."

"That was along about the time the Thunderbolt Kid started musclin' in, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, but — sufferin' sidewinders, what's the Kid got to do with my segundo? You ain't by any chance hintin'—?"

"We'll go see," Len said. "I got a hunch he's back from seein' about the stock by now. You show me where his room's at."

Before a door in the other wing of the house, Enoch Enderlee paused and said, "That's it."

"Don't touch it!" Len warned under his breath. Louder, he called out, "Hefty."

There was no answer.

"You and Miss Nancy stand well back from the door," Len instructed softly.

He took off his hat, and, standing well to one side of the door, flicked up the latch. The door sagged outward about an inch. Len cautiously pulled it wider.

There was a roar then that reverberated in the narrow corridor like a charge of dynamite.

Wood splintered, and some plaster fell. Nancy screamed and old man Enderlee cursed.

When the smoke cleared and the sound throbs quit bludgeoning the ears, Nancy and old man Enderlee both turned to Len Siringo.

"What was it? . . . Are you all right?"

"Never felt better'n my long and lustful life," Len assured them. "Bring the lamp, and you can see."

The lamp spilled yellow light over the wreckage inside Hefty Carmine's room. Nancy gasped, and old man Enderlee swore again.

"It's an old dodge," Len said. "He rigged up a shotgun, you see, with a string tied on the trigger and leadin' around to the door, figgerin' I'd get a

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charge of buckshot hot off the muzzle when I opened the door."

"When *you* opened the door," Nancy gasped. "But how did he know—"

"When you told him about the wire cutters I found, he'd know I had him under suspicion. There were other things that looked bad for him: the way he warned us not to worry when we were drivin' here, that he'd be along to give us safe escort. He didn't come, but he sent the Thunderbolt Kid in. If we hadn't worried, and put the glasses on the approachin' Kid, he'd of gunned us off the seat afore we knew what hit us.

"All that, of course, wasn't enough to hang Hefty Carmine for sure. But enough that he knowed I'd be havin' him on my list. Then when Miss Nancy tipped him off that Lightnin' Ben might be Siringo—that influenced him to act sudden while he still had time. And I reasoned Hefty'd figger that I'd come lookin' for him soon as you tipped me off about the talk you all had. So he fixed the gun-trap for me."

"Then it's been my own foreman who's been sellin' out the men of Storm Valley!"

Len nodded. "That's why I've delayed revealin' my identity and intentions here; I had to find out who the skulker was."

"But where's he gone now?" Nancy asked.

"To join his bloody-fingered brothers, I'd guess. By comin' out in the open like this, it must mean the Kid ain't got much more use for a undercover man. Must mean he's about set for the clean-up. We can look for him any minute now."

"What can we do?" Nancy asked desperately. "There are so few of us . . . ."

"You're forgettin'," Len said. "The valley's full of men on our side, men who've been pushed around by the Kid."

"But how will they know about you?"

"That's where Hammer Harmon's gone. To ease around the valley and send the word circulatin' for a last stand here.

When the Thunderbolt Kid comes blastin', he'll find every rancher's gun in Storm Valley blazin' agin' him!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Len Siringo's Lightning War

LEN SIRINGO wasn't talking through his hat, as events quickly showed. All during the next day and the night that followed, men swarmed in upon the KV headquarters. They came singly and in groups, quiet or boisterous according to their nature, but all of them buoyed up with new excited hope, all of them keyed for the finish fight.

When this was over it would be decided once and for all. They would be dead men, or they would be free men.

Len met each man as he came in, talked to him quietly, and assigned him to a fighting force. Most of his newly recruited army was sent under the direction of Enderlee's riders to guard the herds.

Enoch Enderlee remonstrated about this. "You're not keepin' enough men to guard the headquarters. The Kid'll scout the grazin' flats; he'll see how heavy guarded the herds are—and in consequence he'll attack the house."

"Which is precise what I want him to do," Len said laconically.

"But why, man?"

"I'm chewin' on a idea. You leave the worryin' part to me."

If Len was doing any worying, he certainly wasn't showing it. He calmly directed reinforcing of the doors and windows only on the side of the house that faced the brush-grown slope. After that he went serenely about his usual job of putting up his lightning conductors, running the conductors along the ridge poles and down the sides of the two-story house, connecting them with the high pointed rods on top, and directing the digging of

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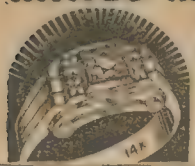

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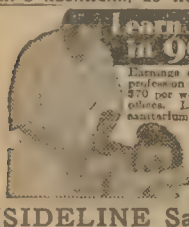

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deep trenches at the bottom for extending the conductors to run the lighting harmlessly off into the ground.

Even Hammer Harmon protested as Len carried the lightning rod work into the second night. "Wouldn't it be more to the point to be extendin' our barricade to the other three sides of the house?"

"What's the use?" Len countered. "They'll have to attack from the brush side. We could pick 'em off like rabbits if they came at us from anywheres else."

"But what's the use wastin' our time with these dang rods?"

"There's a whale of a storm comin' up," Len said complacently. "It's tight in the air. Can't you feel it? An' we want to have the house lightnin'-proofed afore the storm hits, don't we?"

It was Hammer Harmon's private opinion—and Enoch Enderlee's too—that Len had been playing his part as a lightning rod drummer so wholeheartedly that he was a little hepped on the subject.

Len turned out to be a good prophet on one thing, though. It wasn't long before they were all ready to agree that a whacking big storm was in the making. An hour from dawn, and the night wind that cleanly swept the valley had died down completely. The air was oppressive.

One of the thunder rolls sounded off a little different from the rest. The KV defenders were just jittery enough that it took them a moment to identify it. Hoof beats—a bronc fast ridden!

They stood at their posts, guns ready. But the rider gave the countersign when challenged at the ranch house gate, and it developed that he was one of Len's scouts from Rolling Rock.

The man came in, breathing hard. "They're on the move!" he announced. "The Kid and his whole gun-fanged pack. They're headed for here, and they ain't far behind me." He made out Hammer Harmon in the crowd at the door. "They

burned your place down, Hammer."

Hammer took the news stolidly. At any time up till now it would have mattered. After this fight was over—if they won—it would matter again. His blacksmith shop was his pride and he'd calculated to make a good living for him—and for Nancy.

Outside, a whimpering breeze sprang up, and a closer peal of thunder rolled slowly overhead. The lightning was still playing around between the clouds. It hadn't started daggering its destructive bolts to the earth. But it would, and soon.

Len Siringo looked at his watch. "I calculate the storm and the Kid's attack'll come along about daybreak."

Len didn't miss it much. His outriders came in a little while after that, and reported the approach of the Thunderbolt Kid and his gunnies at the foot of the brush slope. In tone with the fast approaching storm, the excitement of the KV defenders expressed itself in a burst of talk and surging movement.

The first lightning bolt to shake loose from the clouds struck the ground at some distance away, and thunder rolled sharply over the house. At the same time the first rifle bullet came whamming out of the night. It struck with a nasty sound in the logs at the front of the house.

Close on the banging echoes of that opening shot, more gun-fire ripped out of the night. Bullets slapped into the logs. A few bored their way through the window loop holes, knocking down plaster.

"Sight on their muzzle flares, and hand it back to 'em, men!" Len commanded them.

They fought with a will, crowding the windows to get their shots in. Even when a bullet gnawed through to club old Devil Grass Hansen to the floor with a grievous chest wound, the defenders were not shaken.

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pointed task of loading the extra rifles to apply deft first aid to Hansen's wound. The fight went on, with the Thunderbolt Kid and his hired killers steadily moving in through the brush on the front slope. More and more of their lead poked through to slice savagely among Storm Valley men as the Kid closed distance.

Then through the thunder that poured from the guns and from the sky, the Kid's voice sounded, ordering his gun-hands to the charge. The firing increased sharply as the attackers lunged forward.

"Steady, men!" Len Siringo ordered. "Make every bullet count. We can hold 'em."

LEN SIRINGO wasn't guessing. The gun thunder outside increased and blended with the roar inside as the Kid's forces charged close. There were more casualties inside the house, but the ranchers stuck to their guns; they threw back lead for lead, and some of it was biting deep.

A moment later they had the certainty that they had won the first brush. The Thunderbolt Kid's voice sounded again, calling his men off. The outside firing dribbled away as the attackers fell back to plan their next move.

The men in the house were jubilant. Eyes glinting, faces sweat-grimed, they waited tensely for whatever more the Thunderbolt Kid might send against them.

Strangely, Len Siringo seemed to be more concerned with those thunderbolts that emanated from the sky. He kept listening to the roll of the thunder as it crashed every minute louder. The wind was still rising too. Len kept looking at his watch, and listening. The first scant pattering of raindrops began to blow in on the wind.

Len caught Hammer Harmon's curious glance on him, and he said, "Full bite of the storm'll be on us any minute now."

"Is that anyways important?" Hammer couldn't help asking.

"Plenty important. Way the sky-thunder's buildin' up, looks like we're goin' to get caught dead-center by an electrical storm."

"Still worryin' about storms—and men dyin' from bullet lead!" Hammer couldn't quite hide his annoyance.

"These new rods stickin' in the sky are bound to attract the lightnin'," Len said speculatively.

"That's what they're there for ain't they?" A sudden burst of gun-fire on the near slope outside broke into his talk. His face lit savagely. "Now we really got somethin' to worry about! They're attackin' in force again. They've crept in and they're blastin' us from close-up!"

"Slam it back at 'em, men," Len bawled.

They were already slamming it back. They stood into the fight as before. But it was desperate gun-muzzle battering this time. Lead seemed to fill the air as thick as the increasing rain, and more and more of it drove inside. Over all, the wind wailed, lightning daggered, and thunder boomed from the sky.

Len Siringo ranged everywhere, closely directing the fight, his own gun triggering fast. But then the lead poured in with such appalling effect as the Thunderbolt Kid pushed the fighting close, that even the boldest of them lost heart.

And strangely, Len Siringo at this moment of their blackest doubt, did little to buck them up.

"They're too many for us!" he bawled. "They're shootin' too straight—and too close. We'll all be dead!"

Odd talk from the West's Number-One Gunman for Freedom! And even if it were true, why did he have to holler so loud? Why did he have to advertise their desperate plight to those ravening gun-wolves outside? It would only encourage them to

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rush the house and force a gun-blazing entrance.

Interspersed with his yammering shouts were low-voiced directions delivered directly to the dismayed ranchers.

"Out the back way," he snapped, "through doors and windows! A few of us'll hold 'em off, then we'll follow you. Hurry; get clear of the house. We can't hold it no longer. Nothin' but thunderbolt destruction awaits us here."

"What is there better for us outside?" Hammer Harmon demanded. "This is our last stand. I'm for fightin' to the last man!"

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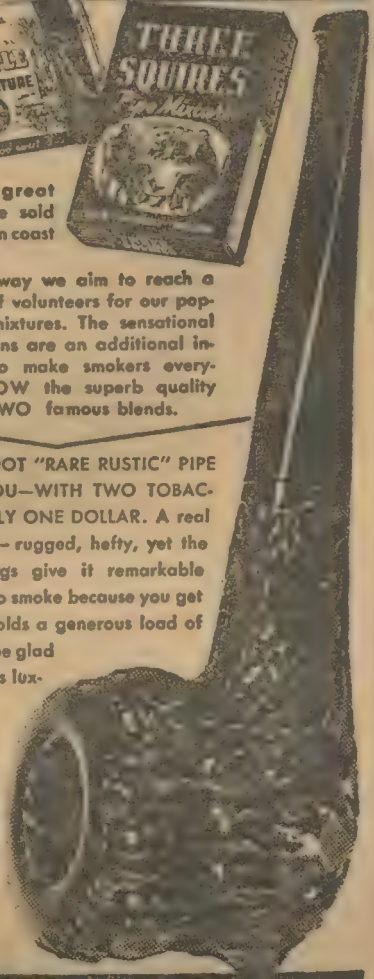

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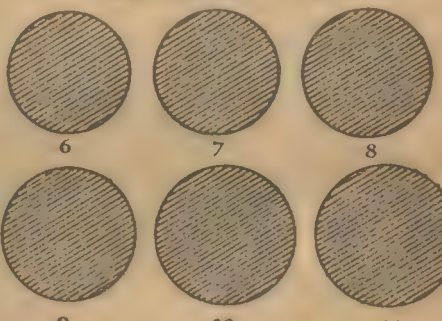

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"And the last woman?" Len cracked. "It's no good, all of us dead. Take Nancy and git out of here."

They cleared out, and Len himself was the last to go. They broke out into the drenching rain and ran. The storm was reaching its full fury now. Wind whined around the eaves, lightning crackled, and thunder shook the ground.

They ran, drenched and shaken by the storm. Shaken too by their failure in what must be their last fight. And as they ran from the house the back way, the Thunderbolt Kid and his gunners poured in at the front, undisputed victors!

"Down," Len Siringo's voice boomed through the crashing storm. "Everybody —down in the mud! That way you can't be seen from the house."

Down in the mud—that was the bitterest moment of all. Day was fast breaking through the storm. They couldn't remain concealed here long. Len Siringo had failed them! The famed law-gunner had blundered. . . .!

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that Len Siringo's sky-hook had caught lightning from the clouds. The lightning forked out of the sky like the fiery fingers of a great clutching hand. It swathed the house in a blue-white light that touched first at the needle-pointed rods, and spread out, skeleton-wise, along the ridge-poles and down the sides of the house, following the iron conductors.

Stunned and blinded the men of Storm Valley groped for a meaning of this bolt from the sky.

Then on the tailing-away echoes of the thunder clap, they heard Len Siringo's booming voice. It was filled with hope and with urgency.

"Up on your feet!" he roared at them. "Follow me! Surround the house!"

Blindly obeying, they surged forward through the buffeting storm, carrying their guns. In the gray morning light at the front of the house they saw a strange and heartening sight.

The Thunderbolt Kid's hired gunners were pouring from the house in a mad chaotic scramble. Most of them had thrown their guns away. All of them were straining so hard to get clear of the house that they were falling in the mud in their haste.

Then the wondering ranchers noticed something else. It wasn't only their guns that the killers had left behind them, but most of their clothes as well! What they had left were hanging to them in rags. When they reeled close, their faces were seen to be contorted with terror.

"You won't need to shoot 'em," Len counciled his men. "Put a few bullets in the air, tap 'em over the head with gun barrels. The fight's all gone out of 'em. The rest of it's only a herdin' job."

THE storm abated soon afterwards. The red sun of morning poked through rifts in the scudding clouds. Inside the house Enoch Enderlee,

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wish all the ranchers who could be spared from herding the prisoners surveyed the awesome wreckage.

The cook stove, and about everything else that contained any great bulk of iron was twisted and bent by the action of the lightning. Doors were blasted from their hinges, beds and chairs looked as though they had been put through a wringer. Five dead gunmen lay in grotesque sprawls amid the wreckage. One of them was the Thunderbolt Kid, and another was the late KV segundo, Hefty Carmine.

"We'll all git together and help you clean up this mess and repair things here, Enoch," a rancher said.

"I'd count that right neighborly," Enoch Enderlee told him.

One by one their eyes were drawn from the wreckage to the outside open door. Len Siringo stood there, long and lank, the peak of his black sombrero brushing the top door frame. He had a stogy, tight-wrapped between his lips.

A little shame-faced, the ranchers looked at him. Feelings of guilt stirred within them all. Only a few minutes before, they had doubted him. More than that, they had blamed him sorely. But now they were free; they had won the good fight. And to Len Siringo must go the credit.

They didn't pretend to understand everything. At the last second, the tables had been turned, it seemed, by an act of God. And yet the ranchers all had sizeable hunches that Len Siringo must have nudged the Creator's elbow.

They wanted to explain how they felt. But they didn't know any other way to blow off the tension within them except by making a kind of joke.

Hammer Harmon was the one to break the ice. He said, self-consciously, "Well, Len, it's lucky for us that Big Jove lightnin' rods ain't all they're cracked up to be. You must of known they was goin' to fail us, huh, the way you shooed us all out of

the house afore all the lightnin' struck?"

Len blew out smoke and said severely, "I resent any imputations agin' the character of Big Jove lightnin' rods." He smiled to take the sting from his words. "Why, what's happened here is only what I meant for to happen!"

Hammer Harmon scratched at his stubbled jaw. "I thought a lightnin' rod was supposed to *protect.*"

"It is, if it's grounded."

"Huh? What's that?"

"The conductor that runs down alongside the house has got to go into the ground to lead the lightnin', harmless, away from the house. We dug the trenches for the ground conductors, remember? But I didn't hook 'em up. Instead, just before the storm hit, I bent the ends of the lightnin' conductors around so they pointed in at the windows.

"Lightnin's lazy. It takes the easiest path every time. When it come rarin' down the conductors, it was easier for it to jump *inside* the house to the stove and such, than it was to get into the ground."

Men nodded. So Len was all right. Everything was all right. . . .

Except for Hammer Harmon. He was thinking despairingly of his burned-down blacksmith shop in town.

Then Len Siringo made even that all right. "There's like to be a brisk trade in lightnin' rods in Storm Valley," he told Hammer Harmon, "after the demonstration we put on here tonight, an' after I fix the ground conductors. I got other calls on me other places. What I'd admire to do is turn over the Big Jove agency to you—"

Hammer Harmon tried to look at Len Siringo and Nancy Enderlee at the same time.

"Len," he said, "I'm thankin' you. But you got to stick around, anyhow, long enough to be best man at my weddin'!"

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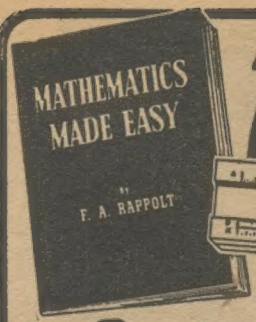

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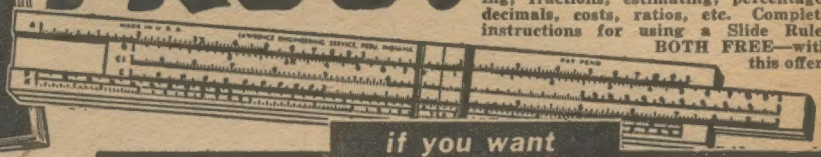

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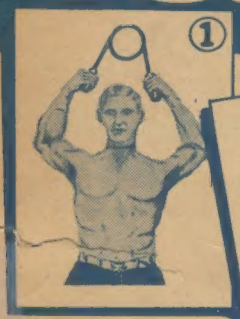

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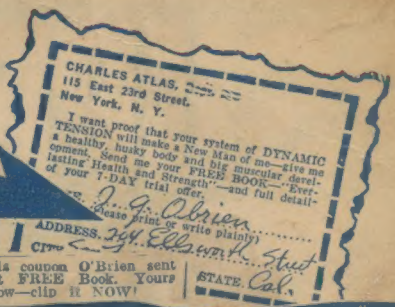
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